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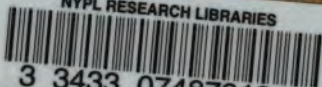
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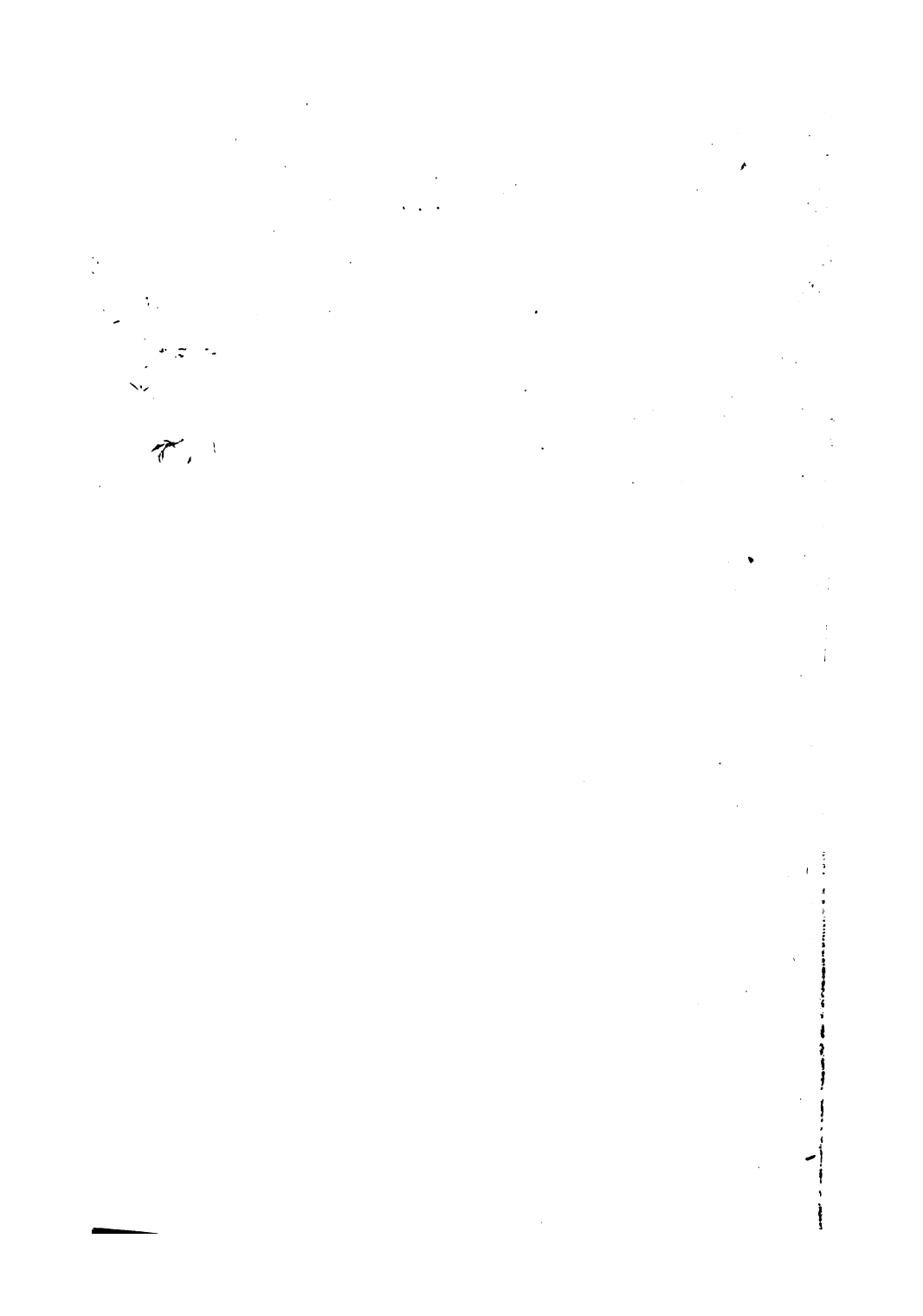
Black Cross Clove
James Luby

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THE BLACK CROSS CLOVE

THE BLACK CROSS CLOVE

A Story and a Study

BY
JAMES LUBY

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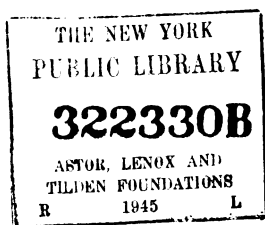
"Whatever is, is right"

L.L.

NEW YORK
B. W. HUEBSCH

1910

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THE MEMORY OF
EMILE ANDREW HUBER,
MY KINSMAN AND FRIEND, WHO LIVED AND DIED
SHARING WITH ME THE CONVICTION THAT WHAT
WE CALL REALITY IS ONLY A DREAM AND THAT
IN DREAMING WE MAKE OUR CLOSEST APPROACHES
TO REALITY—ALSO, THAT ALL WILL COME RIGHT
IN THE END.

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The Black Cross Clove

THE PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I

BEGINS LIKE AN ESSAY BY JOHN FISKE, BUT ENDS WITH
AN OLD LEGEND

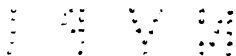
It is an accepted doctrine of science that even the smallest material disturbance is felt throughout the material universe — not only that, but it has a permanent effect on every existing particle of matter. The ripple created when a pebble is dropped into the ocean not only breaks upon the shores of every sea but sends a vibration out to the farthest realms of space. It is felt in every atom of which nature is made up and it has an effect so determinate that, after its passage, the relations of each atom to all the others is never quite the same again. In a word, the vicissitudes of matter are everlasting in their consequences, and even the most trivial has a determinate and determining effect on all that is to be and is to happen after it.

Is the assumption extravagant that some similar law may apply in the world of thought? If the vibrations in the air born of the spoken word make an impression on all things physical, why may not the word itself, which is pure thought, have a definite and persistent effect upon the world of ideas, to which it belongs?

There are few people so little gifted with imagination as not to have speculated at some time or another upon the eternal significance of some seemingly insignificant act of their lives. It may be the crossing of a street; it may be the choice between places to dine at; it may be the choice between neckties in the morning; no matter, we cannot help feeling that life and death, good or evil fortune may have been staked upon the alternative. The thought may not be so obvious, but it is equally inevitable, that every syllable we utter, nay every operation of our minds may be pregnant with consequences not only to ourselves but to others, not only at the immediate moment but in the future.

Our emotions of love may sweeten souls yet unborn to this life and our angry passions may cast a tragic shadow on the destinies of some whose existence we have never even conceived of.

In a mountain country not far from New York, there is one region of wild beauty to which, some dozen years ago, the summer visitor had not yet penetrated.



At the foot of a notch three miles deep in the giant façade of the hills, there was a straggling village of thirty or forty houses, whose only link with the great city was the apple market and whose notions of the outside world were mainly derived from the fisherman who wandered down the notch road about once in two years searching for a trout stream that had not been fished out.

Winnesook was separated — the word is used advisedly — by twelve miles of rocky road from the nearest railway station. There was a sparse summer colony at the head of the Winnesook Notch, but the road from it to the village is desperately steep and the few who ever made the weary journey down to the lowlands and back were so convinced of the pains of the way and the nullity of the reward that whole seasons passed without anyone renewing the experiment.

Almost all the summerers, however, journeyed part way down the bed of the Notch itself, where, far below the level of the road, the Winnesook "creek" leaped then, as it still does to-day, from one rock level to another in shining torrents, hastening to the restful bosom of the Hudson, many miles away. Even the women gathered up their flounces and fluttered from stone to stone along the bed of the stream or glided among the trees down the mossy slopes which skirt the long terrace of cataracts on its southern side.

But not one in hundreds — perhaps not one in five years — ever got past the level of the Black Cross

Clove. From this point almost to the mountain's foot, the climbing is only for the brave and the agile, so the majority turned back from it, generally saddened too, for the atmosphere of the Black Cross Clove was always peculiarly darkening to the spirits. Deep between its rock walls, always black with the moisture which trickled viscously over them, the chill of the air was damp and penetrating. The abyss was filled with an appalling silence. The common voices of nature, with which the Notch and the woods on its sloping southerly side were full, were lost in the Black Cross Clove. The trees, which clung to ledges and shelves at dizzy heights and, leaning far out, cut off the sunlight at all its angles from the bottom of the ravine, seemed never to be wakened to life by the kiss of the wind.

Standing at the angle of the road far above, where it winds about the northern arm of the Cross, and looking down at the billows of tree tops, one was most of all awed by their immobility. The woods seemed to sleep all day in the sunshine, and the shadows of clouds sweeping over them might be taken for their dreams.

Even at this height, where the foliage veiled the depths, and where the enjoyment of the full light and free air stimulated the spirit, the Black Cross Clove was a place of uneasiness. Down in the hollow of the rocks, in the clove itself, horror had its abode. No one ever lingered there. The instinct was to rush half panic stricken to the open air. This was the im-

pression that the visitor got of the place even on some summer day.

But when the winds came down out of the high peaks where they live, when the floodgates of the heavens were unloosed and the devil raged through the mountains with shafts of fire in each hand, then they said, who were caught nearby at such seasons, the Black Cross Clove was full of frantic laughter which rose above all the other voices of the tempest. And in the winter, when even the wild animals let the frost have the forest all to itself, the moans of souls, that had lost their way between the two worlds and taken refuge there, thrilled the tremulous night.

The story which is current still about the Black Cross Clove has, time out of mind, been attributed by residents of the Winnesook region to the Indians. But most likely it is a transplantation of some legend of Teutonic forest lands, brought by early settlers from their old home and adapted to their new one. The story briefly is that the spirit or demon of the mountain fell in love with an Indian maiden and in the guise of a splendid warrior wooed and almost won her. But the young brave, Winnesook, of her own tribe, her former playmate, returning from the warpath met her in the forest, and, at first mistaking him in his pride of paint and feathers for her spirit suitor, she sent out her heart to him with such a gush

of fervor, that it remained his beyond recall. The wedded pair, of course, had to flee from the wrath of the demon beyond the limits of the mountains, in which his power of life and death was supreme. As they descended under cover of a raging storm along the margin of the watercourse through the Notch, the demon suddenly discovered them and hurled his tomahawk after them. He missed the pair through the favor of the Great Spirit, but the tomahawk falling across the Notch, cleft the mountain on both sides two thousand feet in depth, creating the Black Cross Clove. What is more, the tomahawk fell on the demon's own foot as he rushed down the torrent after the fugitives, and pinned him to the earth, so that there he was doomed to dwell in the gloomy depths of his own creation until some woman came of her own accord, gave him voluntarily the love of her soul and consented to go with him as his spouse to the misty realms whither the deities of the Redmen have been relegated by the passing into twilight of the Redman himself.

CHAPTER II

TELLS SOMETHING OF THE EARLY FORTUNES OF THE ELTRINGHAM FAMILY

THE first level of the lowlands, just eastward of the mountain wall, consists of shallow pockets of rock, filled with stony clay or soggy peat. One would think that every other corner of the civilized world must have been settled before anyone would run the risk of starving in this. In fact, however, it was the scene of one of the earliest settlements in the State and, at the period of the Revolution, the village had as many houses and as large a population as it has to-day, although the name of Winnesook, so far as can be gathered, was not attached to it until many years later.

There was nothing very distinctive about the early settlers. The names which survive indicate the presence of a Dutchman or two, a German and a Frenchman. The majority were Englishmen or colonials, drifters from the more prosperous centres for one reason or another, cornered from lack of natural vigor in this outlandish wilderness. They managed to get a cross of Indian blood — Heaven only knows how — into the community. One of the men followed Washington through the French war. Three, according

to tradition, did some campaigning in the Revolution. No one in the settlement ever emerged from the average. If nobody exactly starved even in the grimmest days of pioneerdom, nobody accumulated any substance. It is the same to-day. Nobody has ever grown rich in the place. There is not a considerable house in it and the richest man is the school teacher, who has a salary of \$500 a year and owns a cabbage garden.

Out of the long succession of men with legs like the letter Z, who have lived slow, hazy lives in Winnesook in the last hundred and twenty-five years, we have now to distinguish one Hosea Eltringham, farmer and hog butcher, and we have to take cognizance of him as a man of fifty, worn seventy years' worth, a widower and the father of several children, including a soft, pretty, loose jointed, brown haired girl, just old enough to have formed an absorbing attachment for the most unpromising youth that the village had yet produced. It is somewhere in the early part of the Nineteenth century that we take note of the fortunes of Hosea Eltringham and his child, not earlier than 1800 nor later than 1805, for the young man she loved became a soldier in the War of 1812 and disappeared off the face of the earth, so far as Winnesook could ever find out, in the first campaign, leaving his wife with a boy and a girl on her hands in addition to the first born child whose weird little tragedy we have now to relate.

Hosea Eltringham was not a sour or crabbed man,

nor was he hopelessly intractable as to family or other matters. But he was vain, especially of his good nature, and next after that of his firm and unyielding character, which was really only a habit of temporary obstinacies.

If Ruth Eltringham and Gerardus Pieter Freer had conducted their courting gradually, had met by the roadside — what there was of a road — in the June evenings, had sat up nights together on the doorstep or in the big kitchen, after everyone else had gone to bed, as the fashion of the day was, there is no reason to doubt that in the course of a year or so Hosea — Hozee, they called it, by the bye,— would have assimilated the idea of the match as he had the marriage of his son Stephen to Elizabeth Jardine. By the time all was ready to send down to Wiltwick for Wouter van Gelder, the old Dutch dominie to come up and tie the knot, he would probably have been convinced that the whole scheme was of his own devising, and that he had had considerable difficulty in overcoming the foolish obstinacy of the children.

But Ruth and Gerardus never gave him the opportunity. One bright, cool morning in the early spring, they started out hand in hand from the saw-mill at the foot of the village street. While the sun climbed up from behind Massachusetts and the blushing day spread slowly down the rock wall and the forest from the summit of the mountain to the roofs of the village houses, they took the ox path leading down to the river, each a little bundle in hand. They

hid once or twice in the brush to let an early wayfarer pass and, as they reached the brink of every level in the great rock terrace by which the land descends from the mountains to the water's edge, they stood and looked over at the morning sky, dreaming, perhaps, that the golden radiance would always thus shine in their faces.

At the end of the week they came back. It was noon in frowning weather. At the first door of the village, Ruth stopped and showed her marriage certificate, signed, sealed and delivered by the old dominie under grave protest, but as the inevitable solution of such an escapade. The children, who saw them coming, spread the news and, as the couple moved up the street, one wife after another and not a few of the men came out to the doors.

At house after house, the guarantee of honor was appealingly presented. But the outrage on village ethics was too gross for speedy condonement.

"I hope it may turn out well," said one woman.

"I hope no ill may come out of it," said another.

"Have you ben up to your father's yet?" asked a man, a father of grown up daughters himself, dryly.

Ruth did not cry, but her face was drawn and pleading. She fell back a step at the question, as if the man had offered to strike her.

This was where she was going. Freer had not a soul in the place to whom he was responsible. But she — but neither of them had ever dreamed for a

moment of disregarding the authority or the love of the old man. They had not absconded in defiance. They had never dreamed of not returning. They had gone to escape unpleasantness, a period of scolding and uncertainty, and now they were coming back to make their peace, to be blessed and forgiven and joked at, and to settle down to hard work like all the rest of the world that they knew anything about.

The seriousness of the thing had never come upon them until they met the chill of the villagers' faces. They first realized that there was something quite appalling in their ordeal, when the blunt question came at them out of a face without a particle of relenting in it:

"Have you ben up to your father's yet?"

After this, they stopped at no more doorsteps. They walked fast, hurried on. The children gathered in a mob as near their heels as they dared. The people stood along the roadside or hurried to points of vantage, from which they could see what was to follow. A few moved up the road, under pretence of joining other groups of onlookers. In characteristic rustic ignorance of the personal right of privacy, the whole population constituted itself an audience and, by the time the proceedings began, there were a hundred or more of them gathered near enough to hear all that might be said in a loud voice. The bare-necked women exchanged audible comments. The men with their red arms bare to the elbows had noth-

ing to say. They stood lankily curious, showing their teeth and puckering their eyebrows in the fatuous grin of the countryman.

The Eltringham house was a great stone cube standing a hundred and fifty yards or so back from the road. The space in front was a vegetable patch and it was raised four or five feet above the road level. It was bounded by a fence of loosely piled up stones. The bluestone of that region, breaking up into flat slabs, encourages this sort of fencing.

The old man was in the garden gloomily hoeing young cabbages. When Ruth was first missed, he had been much distressed, fearing some mishap had befallen her. When conjecture grew to certainty as to her elopement, he settled into a moody silence. Through the week, he never left his own land. To the prying of the neighbors with their sympathy, more or less real, he opposed the uniform remark: "I know nowt about her."

As the girl and her new husband, followed by the horde of villagers came up the road, he never lifted his head. As she hurried up the rough slope through the gap in the fence and reached the level of the garden, followed a step or two behind by Freer, who had reached an almost ludicrous stage of fear and embarrassment, the old man went on hoeing, still without raising his head. Perhaps he had not yet noticed her. Perhaps he was trying to make up his mind how he should behave.

Ruth almost ran to within a couple of feet of him.

"Father," she said, in a low voice, "father, I have come home."

He took no notice. He did not look up. He kept on hoeing.

"Father," she said, again, a little louder and shriller, "father, I'm married. Gerardus and me hev ben down to Wiltwick and ben married by Dominie van Gelder. And we've come home, and, father, won't you forgive us, and be friends with Gerardus?"

The old man still made not a sign.

"Father," she said, this time in growing high pitched appeal, "father, I've never done wrong. I'm not a bad girl. I'm married honest, and here's my marriage paper. Gerardus and me is husband and wife and you can't unmarry us again, so you may's well be friends."

"You say you're married," said the old man, without looking up, "and I don't doubt but what you mebbe. I don't care whether you be or not. If so be's you are, you want nowt more o' me. Your place is by your husband. Go with him."

"But Father, won't you forgive us? Won't you take us in 'till we get a home of our own? You wouldn't turn us out on the roadside or send us to strangers, when our own home stands all but empty, with room to spare for us — and we'll work for all we get."

Then the old man kindled up with a sudden flash. He turned on his daughter with rage on his face and a burning eye.

"You left your home of your own free will," he shouted in a dry, cracked voice, "and you'll never come back, by mine. I wish you no ill — you or the man you've gev yourself to, or your children or any belongin' to you. But, ef ever you cross the door o' yon house that you left in hot blood, may cold death be your companion, and make you a sign to breakers of the Fifth Commandment for all time. 'Honor your father,' I tell you. 'Honor your father that your days may be long in the land.' I put the curse on you that they be short and your death cruel if ever you dishonor your father again by blackenin' the doorstep of the house ye hev disgraced. I put the curse of death on you and your children and your children's children even unto the last generation. I curse —"

"Oh, Father, Father, no more of that. Take back that terrible curse!"

The old man stopped short in his eloquence, which indeed had run ahead of his true passion. He was simply swept along by his own words and, at the interruption, his breath gave out and even his eye dulled as suddenly as it had lit up.

The interruption did not come from his daughter. His son Stephen, years older than she, who was married and lived down in the village, had seen what was brewing from a clearing far up the mountain side and had hurried to avert the tragedy of which his father's strange demeanor had forewarned him.

Putting his hand on the old man's shoulder, he

reiterated desperately: "Take it back, Father; take it back before it goes too far. Unsay it, you know you never meant it. Unsay it before it's too late."

The old man gave his shoulder a hitch to displace his son's hand.

"How can I unsay it?" he queried sullenly. "It's said and it must stay said. It's their own earnin's and no fault o' mine. Anyhow, I wish them no ill; I only want them to go away from here, where they don't belong nohow."

Then he turned away and doggedly resumed his hoeing.

"Well, then, Father, I'll have to take them in until they can get a home of their own. They can't sleep in the woods like the deer and the painters. Come, Ruth, we haven't much houseroom, but I guess we can give you and your man a place to lie until you can provide for yourselves."

Ruth seemed inclined to make another appeal to her father. She again held out to him her treasured paper. But her brother caught her by the arm firmly though not unkindly and drew her away.

"Don't you see you will only make it worse ef you stir him up?" he said.

Perhaps he was right; but it is certain the old man was already much disturbed over his outbreak.

As the three reached the opening in the fence and started down the rough incline to the road, he

turned and, leaning on his hoe, called after them:

“Mind what I say. I wish them no ill. I wish they may get on and find their daily bread. I only say I want nowt to do with them. I don’t want to see them enny more. And let them bear in mind, for their own good, to keep away from this house, for I’ve said it and not even the Almighty himself can unsay what’s once said.”

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH THE SCIENTIFIC OR THE SUPERSTITIOUS MAY FIND AN ECHO OF THE SPOKEN WORD

GERARDUS PIETER FREER and Ruth, his wife, soon built their house. On the whole, public sympathy drifted their way after the scene with old Eltringham. Sentiment was in favor of severe admonition of those who gave way too impetuously to the desires of the flesh. But the villagers rather drew the line at cursing. There was superstition enough in them to make the thing very serious in their eyes, and if they did not wholly condemn the old man for his outburst of passion, they sincerely commiserated the young couple as its victims. This was perhaps the reason why the whole community gave them a day's work to help put a roof over their heads. Some of the men cut "lumber" and hauled it to Freer's lot. A day or two later, others helped him frame up a huge cabin, and wall it in with logs, others ploughed his garden and made a beginning of clearing it of stones. Some of the women took a hand towards making the place habitable.

The couple went along neither much to the good nor much to the bad. Freer rather belied his old

reputation for indolence and shiftlessness. It is true he showed no great energy or providence. He was fonder of hunting than of wood chopping or farm work. But he was not altogether negligent, and the family prospered as well as the average of their neighbors.

The first child was born some year or so after the marriage, a little, dark haired girl, with the brown Indian eyes — wild fawn — which nowadays look out of almost every girl face in the region, but which then ran only in one or two families among whom were the Freers. It is fair, no doubt, to credit the little thing with all the common graces of babyhood. There are two congenital qualities of healthy humanity which are irresistible. Babies may be pretty, clever, coy, what not in addition; but these things are only accessory. The hold of babyhood on the adult soul is in its absolute confidence and its absolute enjoyment of life. Nobody cares for the shrinking, suspicious child. Nobody has any real heart for the apathetic one. But everyone loves to be trusted. Everyone's greatest longing and greatest lack is the capacity for unqualified enjoyment, for unconsciousness of the bitter aftertaste of life. There is a thrill in the grasp of a friend, and there is new life in the warm arms of a woman about the neck of a man. But the warmth before which the heart melts most of all is the touch on your cheek of the smiling baby that you take in your arms. And the wanton laughter which puzzles us by its rapturous inanity is,

after all, the one thing in the world worth envying, as we all know.

Whatever her baby endowments, little Ruth Freer soon won the heart of her grandfather. One evening the old man came plunging down the road as the mother stood by the edge of her lot with the baby in her arms. He took in the figure as he passed. Ten steps beyond, he hesitated. He almost went on, but curiosity, perhaps a more generous feeling too, mastered his feeble will and he turned back and stepped up to his daughter.

"How be you, Ruth?"

"How be you, Father?"

"This is your baby?"

"Yes, Father."

He pulled back the shawl and touched its cheek. It rolled its eyes vacantly.

"Well, God bless you, God bless you" — and he turned on his way.

In about ten steps he looked back.

"Don't you never come up to the old house, Ruth," he said in a hard voice. "You know I wish you no ill. I say, God bless you. But don't you never come up there nohow. You know what's once said can never be unsaid."

He went on three steps and turned again.

"Nor the young 'un nuther," he called out. "You know I said 'your children and your children's children.' So be ye keerful."

The old man grew more and more friendly. He

would stop and gossip in the street with Freer, and after a while he would invent calls for himself at the lower end of the village and stop on the way to talk with his daughter and play with the child. And she came out evenings to wait for him. He would never go into her house but he often sat two hours on the big stone near the otrack leading back to the barn on a hot summer evening while she sat on the stump of a forest tree and held the baby sleeping on her knees. About the time her boy was born, some two years later, the little girl had taken to following her grandfather. A little later still, she strayed one midday up the road to his farm and went in through the gap in the loose stone fence and found him hoeing cabbages in the garden patch.

The old man's mingled feeling of horror and delight was indescribable. His clearly defined purpose was to frighten the child so that she might never approach the place again. But when he saw the fright and dismay in her eyes at his blustering rebuke, his doting love overmastered him and he took her in his arms and as he carried her home begged her with tears running down his leathery cheeks into his iron beard, never to come near his house again.

Little need to say how ineffectual were such pleadings. Hardly more so was the mother's old fashioned method of admonition. The child in her third summer could not be kept from her grandfather's garden, and there he and she spent days and days, she playing or sleeping on a bearskin spread under

a shady tree, he working around the place and exhausting his vigilance in keeping her from entering the house or even approaching the threshold. And this she never showed the least inclination to do, until she became conscious of the unspoken prohibition and the unceasing effort to ward her off.

To the sort of contest that followed, there could be but one ending. The allurements of mystery and that love of the forbidden, which is only one form of the assertion of personal liberty, are invincible impulses. No minor motive or restriction ever prevails against these mainsprings of human conduct. No matter how trivial, no matter how great the occasion, the impulse to know and the impulse to be free always prevail in proportion to their intensity.

The inevitable happened one day in the autumn, when the child was supposed to be stringently kept at home because the old man had to go up into the woods to look after his cord wood. The mother's watchfulness relaxed. A careless hired man, contrary to old Eltringham's daily repeated order, went off and left the door of the farmhouse open — just for a minute. How many people there are who act every day on the theory that minutes and seconds do not count in life! The all but incredible coincidence developed — as it always does. By natural instinct, the child, left to herself, toddled up to her grandfather's garden. Not meeting any answer to her little hail at the gap in the loose stone fence, she strayed on in the inconsecutive way of babyhood.

She stopped to pluck a flower. She stopped to grab at a moth. She stopped to pick up a stone. She was awed by the silence of the empty house as she stood at the door ajar. The hollow echo of her renewed hail almost frightened her. Her round chubby face pushed forward like a big flower on a bent stalk, she peeped in at the door, pushed it, put out a foot, drew it back, went in one step, gave a little dance of defiance and started to search the pockets of her grandfather's big coat lying across a settee for maple sugar.

Five minutes later, the mother hurrying in through the gap in the fence in search of the missing child, the hired man hastening to repair his fault, and the old man trudging hastily down from the wood lot, moved by some unaccountable misgiving, were frozen with the horror of a thin wailing shriek, and, rushing wild eyed towards the house, met an awful little meteor, streaming fire and smoke about a Medusa face.

Nobody ever knew how it had happened.

The old man carried the little body back to the edge of the woods at the rear of her parents' house. He helped dig the little grave and he helped fill it in. Then he walked up home without a word. He never spoke to his daughter again and hardly to anyone else. He raised himself in bed with horror stricken face to prohibit her coming to bid him farewell or entering the house at his funeral. Just before he passed away, and long after everyone had supposed

him to be insensible, he muttered something, and his son, bending his ear to the dying lips, caught the sounds: "What's said, can't be unsaid, and what's done, can't be undone."

Things do not change perceptibly in Winnesook. For years and years there was always an Eltringham in the big stone farmhouse at the western end of the village and there was always a Freer in the log house down the road and in the frame cottage which succeeded it. Neither family changed in fortunes to any appreciable degree. They drifted apart, and in time even the relationship was forgotten. There is a tradition that some half century or so ago, a Freer, not of the eldest line but a direct descendant of Ruth Eltringham, went up one day to the old homestead to do some chores. Never thinking that the vague superstition of the village would apply to himself, he freely went into the house. When, a few weeks later, he was killed in the grist mill by slipping on the mealy floor and tumbling into the machinery, the story of the old Eltringham curse was repeated with modern improvements.

In 1846, Josiah Eltringham, a bright, stalwart lad of twenty, enlisted under Colonel Burnet in the Second Regiment of New York Volunteers for the Mexican War. He fought all through the fiery campaign of Winfield Scott and later his regiment was quartered in the conquered capital. Coming home the



captain of his company, with a wide view of the world for a backwoods American of those days, the village of Winnesook was, of course, too small to hold him, and he settled in New York, using his arrears of pay to start in a commission business, handling produce from the Hudson farms. His fortunes were, relatively, not unlike those of his race in the old settlement. He never ranked among the richest, but he emerged from the mass of the struggling and he left a comfortable estate to his only son, Josiah Second. The latter increased the capital and in his turn passed it on, once more to an only son, whom he endowed, besides, with a considerable access of conventional civilization. The New York branch of the family never wholly lost touch with the main stock at Winnesook. Captain Josiah Eltringham naturally visited the old house at more or less frequent intervals. Josiah Second did so two or three times in his adult years and once he sent up young Stephen Eltringham — recrudescence of one of the old names — in his early boyhood to spend a few months learning country life and winning vigor and spirit from the wild scenery and pine laden air.

THE STORY

CHAPTER I

SHOWING HOW STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM CAME INTO HIS INHERITANCE

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM sat in his studio on West Tenth street. The June sun was streaming in. Stephen was facing his easel. He was pretending to work on a blue monochrome, a recollection of his winter's cruise off Florida — pretending to himself. For, though his eyes seemed intent on the photograph pinned to the corner of his drawing board, his brush was idly spreading blue spots over his trouser legs and the patch of color had dried up on the porcelain slab which lay on a stool beside him.

Stephen sat back in his camp chair and gazed into vacancy. The sunlight danced in and out through the meshes of a filmy Indian scarf. It glinted on a shield; it flashed on an old candlestick, and it bathed a two foot plaster Venus in such radiance that she looked as proud as marble. It soaked into young Eltringham's brain and intoxicated him with the spirit of the wide open air. His mind was miles away. His thoughts were ranging far in time as well as

space. He was weaving eager plans out of the sun and the breeze, and not a shadow from the future fell across the path of his spirit.

As he planned, he grew excited. He stood up and threw back his shoulders in his characteristic way. His blue eyes glowed; the wings of his thin curved nose quivered, and that smile that was so taking played about his sensitive lips as he pursed them out to meet the cigarette which he lit. He walked about, not up and down but from place to place, touching this and that object, adjusting the angle of a statuette to the light, straightening a foil that hung on the wall, flicking dust from a bit of old brocade. His step was vigorous rather than elastic, and when he stood his body seemed to sway a little like all tall, slim men who taper from shoulders to feet.

It was plain he was much stimulated by something. But when a loud rap sounded on the door, he tiptoed back to his seat, thoroughly wet the big splotch of blue on his palette, and swept the half finished picture with two or three bold strokes. When the rap was repeated and he called out, "Come in," he was outwardly so cool and indifferent that it was plain coolness and indifference made up his favorite pose.

The man who came in was younger than Stephen, perhaps twenty-four — light, wavy hair rather long; aquiline nose, sharp chin, thin face, high complexion, exquisite dress without exaggeration, a bounding step and an attitude which might have seemed theatrical if it had not been so obviously unconscious.

There were those who said that when Charley Mayhew came into a room, they expected to hear the band play.

"Asleep?" asked the newcomer in a full, mellow voice.

"No-o, working."

Eltringham deepened the blue of the ocean in the right hand middle distance, and, reaching for a brush and some Chinese white, prepared to brighten up a spot in the moonlight. He never looked around.

"Absorbed in your art?" remarked Mayhew with a slight tone of disgust.

"Oh, not exactly."

There was a pause of thirty seconds. Eltringham stuck on another little bunch of white just where the full volume of the moon's rays struck the water. He looked at it with his head down on one shoulder, then on the other. Then he put down his brushes, and tilted back his camp chair — a special gift of his. Still he never turned his head.

"Hallo, Charles," said he wearily, "come over and sit down where I can see you. Give me a cigarette."

Mayhew dragged a low chair to the side of the easel, sat down with his hat on, gave Eltringham a cigarette and lit one himself.

"When do you go?" said he.

"Go?" queried Eltringham in return. "Go where?"

"When do you start on your trip? I mean,"

Eltringham was evidently astonished.

"Why, certainly. Won't you go to the Nile this year, or Tangiers, or Malta, or some confounded place?"

Eltringham relapsed into his pose.

"Oh, of course," he responded with dry carelessness; "but I'm not going across this summer."

"No? Who is she?"

"Who's who?"

"She! Who is she? Heiress or model?"

"Ah! Almost a mind reader, Charles!"

After a pause, Eltringham unbent and explained.

"I am not going to Europe this year," said he, "because I intend to spend the summer on my own place."

He could not help letting a faint inflection of conscious pride creep into his voice.

"Yes! Certainly! I see. Your country seat as it were — a bench in Central Park?"

"No-o-o," rejoined Eltringham, striving to conceal under a drawl that stimulation, which had had possession of him all the morning. "No-o-o, I mean literally what I say. I am going to spend the summer on my own place. There is such a thing, though you may not know it. In fact, I did not know it myself until last night. It is not very large, I imagine; I really know very little about it. But I believe, as the real estate advertisements say, it is desirably situated, though not exactly within walking distance of the station."

"Yes? Been investing your surplus income in suburban building lots? Or is somebody dead?"

"That's it. Somebody's dead, poor beggar. I hope he's none the worse for it. He was some sort of uncle or older cousin of mine—I am not a good genealogist, but I am sure of one thing: He was the head of all the Eltringhams, the Chief of the tribe as long as he lived, and now that he's dead, I am."

"I thought you looked rather more jaded than usual to-day. It must be hard to bear."

"Oh, poor, old chap, I never saw him. I don't really pretend to mourn very hard."

"You're too literal. I meant the coronet and the lands and hereditaments."

"Well, the Eltringhams, I'd have you know, were lords of the manor in Winnesook before Columbus landed. They intermarried with some damned immigrants somewhere around 1700, and I suppose the succession has passed into the female line. But I tell you the roots of every one of us run deep down into the heart of the mountains."

"Oh, truly? The case of the seed that fell upon stony ground;"—a pause—"and you feel drawn back to the cradle of your race?"

"I think I shall go there for more reasons than one. I will have to run up to Wiltwick to prove my claim. I believe there are some formalities. Then I shall go on and look at the place. I have not seen

it since I was twelve years old; but my memory of it is pleasant — an old stone house with four or five rooms in it, all the floors more or less shaky; garden patch with apple trees; woods behind it, the village before and below, and the mountain towering above, it seems to me only a few yards off, though I suppose it is half a mile or so. I know the house always seemed to be in the shadow of the cliff, though, again, I suppose it wasn't. Indeed it must have been a sunny place for it looked east or southeast. From a rock a little way above it, you could see the Hudson."

"Seems as if it might be an interesting sort of place. If it's in Winnesook, it can't be far from my Uncle Bob's cottage. What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't exactly know. I have plans but I can't make them definite until I see the place and size it up. I shall certainly try to live there this summer." — Long pause with considerable smoking and some painting.—"I have half a notion to revamp the house — not spoil it or modernize it, you know, but put it in repair; paint or whitewash or something, then send up a lot of rugs and odds and ends with just furniture enough to eat and sleep. I suppose there is stabling for a horse. I know the native feeding is awful, but there's a Jap I can get for the summer, and I hope the raw material of food can be landed at the door from somewhere. I swear I will try it, unless I turn against the place when I see it.

Perhaps some of you fellows will give up Bar Harbor to keep me company in relays."

"Very likely. And then, you know, you can get Trixie and some of the push from the Frivolity to come and whoop things up a bit if it gets too slow."

"Well, hardly. I might have no objection to Trixie putting up at a boarding house within reaching distance. But my house is the house of my fathers, though it may only be a tumble-down hovel when I see it, and I propose to disgrace it in no way. No Trixie there, if you please."

"Oh, it's just as you please. No doubt you're right. I would probably feel the same way myself; but as my baronial halls have not descended upon me as yet — by the way, I don't want to joke about that for they won't come to me while my mother lives — but what I mean is that — Oh, you know! Not being a landowner, I mean to say, I don't know how they feel."

"That's all right, old chap. I'm not offended. By the way, why don't you come up with me?"

"Can't. I have a real, live client this week. I have to wring his last cent out of him. I'm to try a case for old Gruber on the eighteenth and I can't go away until then. Besides, I am putting through Mr. Hexamer's will for his widow. There isn't a thing to do, but she chooses to think there is and it isn't for me to contradict her. She pays."

"Oh, well! Lunch?"

CHAPTER II

TELLS OF A LIGHT-HEARTED PROMENADE UPON THE HIGHWAY OF FATE

It was a bright June Sunday — early June. The sun pouring down through the young foliage flecked the road with lace patterns. In the open spaces where the flood of gold had its way, the swelter of summer already had possession of the air. The chill of the departed snow held its own where the shadows fell.

The birds — which have returned to the mountains in recent years — gave the sunshine voice. Squirrels and chipmunks shook the drowsy saplings as they darted to and fro. All the runlets and rills rippled, sparkling and splashing, in the exuberance of springtime. They elbowed their way through the fresh young grass and furrowed tracks across the highway in contempt of the Town Commissioners. Like children dancing and singing at their release from school, the waters were glad at liberation from their ice prison.

Stephen Eltringham was almost as joyous as the birds and the rills as he came tramping along the road. It was the second day that he had been in the open air, and he was saturated with it. Its vigor

was in his gait as he swung along. Its clarity was in his eye as he worshipped the bold contrasts of nature's painting. Its buoyancy was in his heart for he took every step with exultation; his every thought dwelt on pleasure and progress—the enjoyment of the country and the development of his art. There was nobody near to see him so his pose had disappeared. He broke into fits of singing from time to time, throwing up his face to the sky.

He was going, as he had planned, on foot from Wiltwick to Winnesook. Of course, he took neither the straightest nor the shortest course; but this Sunday afternoon found him nearing the end of the journey as he pushed rapidly north along the shady aisle of the East Border road, which skirts the brow of the mountain. There are only three houses in the fifteen miles of this road and one of these is abandoned; the boarding season was a month off and the natives do not wander far on Sundays in June, so Stephen had the road pretty much to himself. Intoxicated with the air as city people often are, he gave free rein to the impulses of his youth. He not only sang but occasionally danced along the road to his own music. He leaped at branches of trees, whistled to the squirrels and called them by pet names.

Sometimes, for a mile or so, he relapsed into musing and plodded along unconscious of his surroundings. His mind wandered far into the future. But the rhapsody of the scenes that his fancy painted

soon demanded physical expression. Then he broke out again, thrashing the bushes with his heavy walking stick, marching at high speed, and carolling a music hall ballad or a grand opera aria at the top of a half developed tenor voice.

It was in the midst of one of these mad fits, far along in the afternoon, that fate came upon him. He had run from Heaven knows what beginnings to the "Jewel Song" in "Faust." Conscious of the incongruity of the performance while ravished with the immortal juvenility of the strain, he compromised with himself by burlesquing the sentiment with extravagant gesticulation and facial contortions. He swung round a sharp bend in the road to the lines:

"Ah! S'egli qui fosse
Per così vedermi,
Come una damigella,
Mi troverebbe bella!"

when a chorus of laughter that sounded like a chime of sleighbells burst from a high bank to his right, and the next moment he found himself fending off three small dogs which barked with miniature savagery while they made sharp dashes at his legs.

The spectacle of a young man, who thinks he is alone, giving escape to his animal spirits in song, is not exactly impressive. But it is dignity itself compared with the same young man protecting his legs from one determined fox terrier, one irreconcilable skye and a boisterously abusive black-and-tan.

He is apt to say odd things, and there are more graceful exercises than the shuffling of feet and whacking on the ground with his stick by which Stephen held his assailants at bay, while some one of them took advantage of his attention being directed to the others to charge closer to the objectionable legs, with renewed explosions of barking and snapping.

The combat certainly did not diminish the glee of the spectators on the bank. The laughter went on and on. Shrieks of six year old pitch graded up through the teens to the merry peals of the central figure in the group.

At last Stephen Eltringham remembered the infallible remedy for dogs. He stooped as if to pick up a stone. On the spot, the three turned tail and ran — the fox terrier turning a somersault in his sudden retreat — and only faced about again at a thoroughly safe distance to renew their expressions of disapproval of the legs.

Then the group on the bank began to recover itself. A big boy ran at the dogs with a switch shouting admonitions to "be still." With growls they retreated to the cover of the bushes.

Stephen, who was far more angry than alarmed, did his best to recover an attitude of dignity. The children watched him with broad grins. Struggling with her smiles, the eldest of the party took him in from head to foot with frank eyes that very soon shot an amicable overture at him.

For Stephen did not go on at once. He stood a moment studying the group and then a good many detailing the girl. As his eyes travelled from her lithe, graceful figure to the wavy, chestnut hair which framed her soft but firm face, a flush mounted to her cheeks and a mist of light seemed to veil her eyes. Her mirth died away, but she met his eye and studied him from head to foot with innocent frankness and simple satisfaction.

Stephen was a captivating figure for any girl of eighteen to look upon. His tall, active frame was picturesquely accoutred. The white dust covered his shoes and golf stockings. He wore corduroy breeches and a gay pinkish shirt with a brilliant scarf. A quaint silver clasp held his belt. Across the front of his black velvet jacket — relic of his year in Rome — his chain glittered on the way from his buttonhole to his breast pocket. His soft grey felt hat was thrown back. His eyes looked boldly but kindly out of his sun browned but fine and sensitive face. In his right hand he held his stick and his knapsack dangling from its sling. Between the middle finger and thumb of his left, he caressed his close cut moustache.

“I really beg your pardon,” said Stephen, doffing his hat with a slightly exaggerated sweep.

“I don’t see why,” replied the girl in the sweetest voice, and with the sweetest smile, Stephen thought, he had ever heard and seen. “I think it is we who ought to apologize for our rudeness, for

—laughing, you know, and for our dogs too. They really are not wicked. They wouldn't hurt you."

"Not exactly a case of Actæon in spite of the encounter with Diana, eh?"

Girls seldom understand classical allusions, but they never miss a compliment. This girl blushed, and again the mist of light seemed to exude from her eyes and shimmer intoxicatingly before them.

"Well, as I have broken in on your rustic privacy, perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me the way to Winnesook. The road I know ought to cross somewhere about here."

"Oh, yes, just a little way further. When you go round that bend you'll see a hotel. That's on the road but you don't go that way. You turn to the right 'round a house below the crossing and go down the mountain."

"That's our house," chipped in a stout, freckled boy.

"Oh, is it? And who are you? Let me see; I guess your name's Koko — eh?" said Stephen.

"No it ain't, it's Bob."

"Are you a native here and to the manner born?"

Stephen looked from the boy to the young girl as he asked this question. She answered.

"We are from Brooklyn," she said. "Our name is Seaman. I am Virginia Seaman"—Stephen smiled as he recognized the name.—"My father owns the house at the corner of the road and part of

the glen and we come up every year in June. He owns ships, I think. He has an office on Front street. The masts of the ships nearly come into the windows."

"Oh, listen to her," screamed one of the boys, "she thinks the jib boom is a mast."

"Oh, thanks," said Stephen somewhat irrelevantly. "I'm delighted I met you. Perhaps your father will let me come up and see him some day. My name is Eltringham — Stephen Eltringham."

"Are you the Mr. Eltringham they are all talking about down in the village?" ("Oh, they're all talking about me, are they?" interjected Stephen.) "The Mr. Eltringham who is going — who is the heir to the old Eltringham farm."

"Yes, I believe I am that fortunate and happy man."

"Then you are Charley Mayhew's friend, Mr. Eltringham the artist, too," — with a little ecstatic gesture. — "Papa" (accent on the second syllable) "says so."

"I'm afraid I am."

"I saw your pictures at the Water Color."

"Gracious, that's hard luck."

"Why, no. They were fine. One of them, the girl's face, was lovely. Don't you think so yourself?"

"Well, I hope it was."

"Do you know" — going off at a mental tangent — "they said it was like me."

"Then I'm sure it was."

"Was what?"

"Why, I think lovely was the word you used."

"Oh, Mr. Eltringham, you're mean. I didn't think you'd do that. You know I didn't mean it. 'Pon my word I didn't."

"No, I dare say not. But I—Oh well, I mustn't do that of course."

"I really didn't mean it."

"Why, of course not, Miss Seaman. Only you know I couldn't let such an opportunity of telling the truth escape. I have to tell fibs nearly all my life. Every artist must if he wants to sell his pictures."

"Now you're joking me still. I'm very angry. I'm sorry we met you."

"Ah, there's my usual luck. Call back the dogs."

"What for?"

"Why, I'll let them eat me this time. I don't want to live any more."

"Mr. Eltringham I'll not like you if you make fun of me."

"Very well. I'll think of nothing but dinner in your company hereafter."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, isn't dinner the most serious thing in the world? I certainly can think of nothing less conducive to fun than dinner in this part of the world."

"Poor boy, have they been giving you beefsteak?"

Stephen groaned.

"I must tell papa to ask you to dinner soon and save you from starvation."

"Thanks very much; but I'm afraid I can't quite wait until then. I must have some sort of light lunch meanwhile — this evening for instance — and I suppose I must sleep somewhere to-night, so — I think you said the road crossed a little way from here."

"Yes, unless you'd like to go down the Notch itself. It's shorter if you don't mind the climb."

"I don't think I will look for any more adventures this evening. The next savage animal might mean business."

"It's very easy. I've been down twice."

"You've been down?" — mildly surprised.

"We've been down too," chorused the three smaller girls.

The boys had long ago tired of the dialogue and strayed into the woods. The girls with instinctive feminine interest had drunk in every word of it.

"Oh, you've been down, have you?" replied Stephen to their announcement. "But you're only little girls."

"Well I'm only a little girl too," — mutinously —

"Just ask papa if I'm not."

She was five feet five.

"Forgive me. You look tall standing on that bank."

"Well, I am a little girl, and I don't want to be anything else — at least not yet. Now you had better go down to the village or all the beefsteak will be gone."

"No hope of it, but since you bid me begone — good night"

It was just falling into twilight. Stephen took off his hat and looked into the girl's face with a grave smile.

"Good night," said she. Her smile nearly blinded him. Her voice gave him a thrill. He turned on his way. He had gone about six steps when she called after him:

"Mr. Eltringham."

He turned and stopped and took off his hat again.

"I didn't mean it that way. Upon my word I didn't."

"Mean what?"

"Oh you know"—with charming embarrassment—"about the picture."

He looked at her with absolute sobriety of visage, though his spirit was dancing.

"I know you did not mean it that way. I never for a moment thought you did. Rest easy. Good night."

"Good night."

CHAPTER III

THE NEW ELTRINGHAM ESTABLISHES A REPUTATION IN WINNESOOK

ALL the way down hill in the deepening twilight, that expression, "Only a little girl," kept hold of Stephen Eltringham. He went over the entire scene in detail. He had spasms of anger at the dogs and spasms of anger at himself. The sense of having seemed ridiculous was unbearable to him. Then he smiled as he thought of the brave, open faces of the children, the pretty delicacy of the girl. He felt the blood rush to his temples as he recalled the mist of light that seemed to shimmer before her eyes.

"Only a little girl," he repeated to himself, and he laughed outright at the qualifying words, "at least not yet."

"I don't want to be anything else; at least not yet."

He wondered for whose sake she would presently consent to enter the world of grown-ups, and the idea passed through his mind, quite impersonally, that the fellow would not be too much to be pitied.

When he came to the turn in the road where it winds about the northern arm of the Black Cross

Clove, he leaned on the barrier of young logs and looked over the brink. He started back with a shudder; the protection seemed so frail and there was so much horror in the sheer depth.

At the opposite angle, after walking around the arm, he stopped again. He did not go near the edge. But he looked over the inky billows of the forest, and listened to the many voices of the creek a thousand feet below.

Another weary mile and a half, the weariest of all, down the steep road, and Stephen found himself coming out of the gorge with the lights of Winnesook twinkling just below and before him. He had noticed a few minutes earlier that a mile or two away the country was still visible in the afterglow. But, close under the mountain, it was almost dark. Only the diffused light from the upper air gave the surrounding scene the visibility of a murky etching.

In the breathless quiet, amid this gloom, Stephen marched on. He knew the place he had come to see was near at hand. He kept watching for it to the left, the northern side of the road, so that he stumbled over stones and ruts. The darkness, the rush of the creek, now not far off, which seemed to intensify the stillness, the nearing fulfillment of expectation — all together set his nerves on a strain and his mind in a whirl.

The road came out of the woods on the side he was watching and ran under a bank some five feet high, topped by a loose stone fence. He walked along

this for a full minute. Then the bank dipped so that he could look over it and a hundred and fifty yards or so back from the road, a black cube showed blacker than the ground and the woods. A hundred steps brought him to a worn slope in the bank and a gap in the loose stone fence. He walked up to it and stood in the opening. He was on his own land. His own house, the shelter of his forefathers was before him. He shivered as if a waft of chilly air had passed him. His mind cleared. His nerves relaxed. He was conscious of the total absence of anything like emotion. He actually lapsed into his pose of cool indifference, as if he had an audience. He lit a cigarette, sat down on the end of the stone wall, and smoked with a certain air that was habitual with him. Then he began roaming back over the time fourteen years before when as a boy he had played about the place. He recalled the Eltringham of those days, a very old man, the father of the Eltringham lately passed away, whom he never saw because he was then living in Wiltwick. The old man and his son were always best friends when far apart.

He sat perhaps half an hour, while the gloom deepened into night. Suddenly a girl's voice singing came out of the darkness behind him. It was a thin little voice, sweet but trivial. But at such a moment it gave Stephen Eltringham a thrill. He slewed around in his seat and watched the spot whence the sound came. He judged the singer was some

little way off. The voice came nearer and then a white figure appeared among the trees on the other side of the road, rising by steps out of the ground, it seemed, as the owner of the voice climbed up the slope from the level of the creek. All at once the song stopped in a little shriek.

"Don't be afraid," called out Stephen in his very pleasantest voice, "I'm not the ghost."

"You 'most scared the wits out o' me," said the girl, resuming her way along the road.

As he watched her, he thought her eyes glowed in the dark like a wild animal's.

He kept pivoting on his seat, as she passed. About twenty steps beyond him, she stopped, turned and as he judged stared at him. It was too dark to see her face. He watched her with composure, puffing his cigarette. Half a minute passed.

"Good evening," said Stephen coolly but pleasantly, slightly raising his voice.

There was no reply. The figure melted into the darkness. Not even the beat of her footfall came back from the dusty road. Stephen got up, took another long look at the black house, and followed into the village. In five minutes, he was standing before the porch of the Winnesook House, Andrew Garrett, proprietor. Garrett, his wife Annie and John Van Camp and Silas Slocum, deep in rocking chairs, sat on the low veranda enjoying the bland evening, together with the gossip of the church, the alehouse and the byre — the donation party for next

week, Gerrit Freer's growing intemperance and the loss of Farmer Smith's calf.

"This is the village hotel, is it not?" asked Stephen.

"Well, 'tain't exactly a hotel," replied the proprietor, a slow, good humored, pudding faced, sandy man of thirty.

"A summer boarding house, I suppose."

"Well, that's more like it only we don't git no boarders. We've ben thinkin' of havin' the place writ up a bit."

"Good idea; but anyway you can give me a room to-night and something to eat."

Garrett hesitated. He advanced through life from one hesitation to another.

His wife cut in, however. She never hesitated — a black haired, rosy, buxom young woman, with strong, meeting eyebrows over bold, ardent eyes.

"We kin give you a room easy," said she; "but I don't know's we kin do much in the way of eatin' you."

"Oh, don't worry," said Stephen, "anything will do. I'm hungry enough to eat grass."

"We ain't got no beefsteak in the house."

"Thank heaven!"

"Do tell, don't ye fancy beefsteak?"

"That's it. I admire and respect it above all other meats."

"Seems to me I don't catch your meanin'."

"I am too hungry to mean anything except mur-

der and cannibalism if I can't get any ordinary food for good money. You have milk, I suppose, and eggs and butter — and good nature as well as good looks. Come now, hurry up a meal for me and don't see me faint at your doorstep."

The woman took a hard look at him as he stood in the light of the reflector that was fastened to the wall by the main door. She sized him up exactly for what he was. He suited her fancy well, and with a smiling face she marched off to the kitchen and living room to prepare the best the house afforded for him.

Garrett continued the conversation, without troubling himself to stand up or even to ask his long and much desired guest to take a seat.

"What you sellin'?" asked Garrett.

"Selling? I don't understand."

"I thought you was sellin' jew'lry or flower seeds or some such truck," said Garrett, pointing to Stephen's knapsack.

"Oh, I see. No, no, I've nothing for sale about me except my soul, and the Devil seems to be overstocked. At least he hasn't made me anything like a decent offer, so far."

"Don't forgit, young man," commented Deacon Van Camp gravely, "that he goeth about like a roarin' lion seekin' whom he may devour."

"Well, if he does," said Stephen, "it's a serious tactical blunder. If he roared less, he might bring down more game."

"He has the cunnin' of the serpent, young sir, and

woe upon him who pits his brains agin him. His victims is legion."

"Not a bit of it," said Stephen cheerfully. "I believe the Devil is starving these days. Hell is out of fashion as a winter resort, and nobody goes there. I don't know a soul who has even a chance of exploring the bottomless pit."

Scenting trouble, Garrett cut in with the inevitable, "Come far to-day?"

"A long day's walk," was the reply.

"Live in New York?"

"Sometimes in the winter."

"Goin' on to Wiltwick to-morrow?"

"I don't know yet."

The announcement that dinner was ready stopped the inquisition and Stephen, after washing his hands outside the kitchen door, proceeded to demolish eggs, cold boiled beef, homemade bread, butter, and preserves with the healthy determination of twenty-eight. He dipped deep into the milk pitcher and even swallowed — for the sake of its warmth — a cup of the villainous decoction which Mrs. Garrett called tea. The woman hovered about him and plied him with meat and drink and questions. In self-defence, he soon turned the conversation on her, and before the meal was over, something uncommonly like a full fledged flirtation was in progress.

Mrs. Garrett would gladly have prolonged it under her husband's nose. She invited Stephen to go out and sit on the porch for that very purpose. But

Stephen had had enough of it, and said he would take a stroll.

"Law sakes," said the lady, "I'd a thought you had walkin' enough to-day."

"Oh, that was fast walking," he explained. "I'll just lounge now, to taper off before I go to bed"—and he walked out by the back door and started through the wood behind the house, down a steep path to where he heard the creek still talking to itself in the hollow.

Coming back in half an hour, and walking around the end of the house on the soft grass, which muffled his tread, he was just in time to witness the arrival of another native—his expression—a comfortable looking, cheerful countryman, who came up the road in something of a hurry. Some instinct told him he had an interest in the arrival, so he stood still in the shadow.

"Evening, Andrew!" said the newcomer as he came into the full light of the reflector.

"Good evening, Martin. Howdy?" said Garrett cordially.

"I hear as you've got Stephen Eltringham a-stop-pin' with you—him as is comin' to inherit old Hozee's farm up yonder."

"Stoppin' with me," said Garrett in unfeigned astonishment. "Why, I don't know as I hev."

"Oh, yes, ye hev," rejoined the man called Martin, who, by the way, was Martin Peters, the village schoolmaster, rich on \$500 a year and a cabbage

garden. "Ruth Freer told me. 'Pears she met him up the road, and she says she saw him come here and heard him dicker for a lodgin'."

"Oh, that's him, is it. Guess you're right then. Thar's a tall thin chap here in a kind o' crazy rig. I guess he bes the man. He didn't say nothin' about it. I thought first off he was sellin' some sort o' truck; but he said he was only tryin' to sell his soul. Seems kind o' queer."

"Guess that's him."

"Whar did Ruthy meet him? Did she send him here?"

"Don't know's she did. 'Pears she was comin' crosst the creek from Marthy Woodbury's an' as she kem up'n the road opposite old Hozee's she see him a settin' on the wall. 'Fust off,' says she, 'I took him for Winnesook, a settin' there so fine and straight, an' I thought I'd a died.' She's queer that girl. Thar's somethin' loony about her. She's all the time thinkin' o' Winnesook and the Indeens an' such old time gibberish. She's not right, I do believe."

"But how'd she find out it was the new Eltringham from New York?"

"I don't jest know; but she must 'a had some speech with him. 'Deed I remember now she said he called out to her — you see she let out a screech like when she seed him — he called to her, 'Don't you be afeard nohow, I ain't no spook.' Ha-ha! 'I ain't no spook,' says he. He must be a queer one too. I guess they was well matched."

"Guess he is," said Garrett. "He said jest now to Annie that he'd rather eat grass 'n beefsteak any day. An' he never said a word about who he was or ownin' the place up yonder. Mebbe he ain't the man after all."

"Oh, I guess he is all right. I reckon Ruthy knowed what she was talkin' about. He must 'a told her. She said he talked with a kind o' command'n voice — leastways as if he was accustomed to have everyone fly around an' do what he said. Anyhow, I looked for him 'most any day. I had a letter from Lawyer Bryan, down to Wiltwick, on Saturday, sayin' he was on his way here, a-walkin' 'round about, over the mountain. I was on my way home from meetin' when I happened on Ruthy down to Jones's a-tellin' o' seein' him. So I jest went right to the house an' got the key. I thought as he might want to go up 'n look over the place before he went to bed. Where is he?"

"He said he was goin' fer a stroll," put in Annie Garrett; "lan's sakes, as ef he hadn't walkin' enough all day. I reckon he won't be long now."

"Guess I'll wait for him."

Stephen judged that this was a good time to break in. He coughed by way of warning, and stepping out of the shadow with a brisk step approached the group.

"Beautiful evening," he remarked innocently.

"Here's a man lookin' for you," said Garrett.

"For me?"

"You be Stephen Eltringham, be you not?" queried Peters, without standing up.

"I am Mr. Eltringham — Stephen Eltringham."

"Well, my name is Peters, Martin Peters, and I'm the one that has the keys to your house, as Lawyer Bryan's told you. I've come up because I thought you might want to go an' see the house to-night; I can't go with you in the mornin'. I must be in school by half-past eight."

"Oh, thanks; but I don't care to go up to-night. It's rather dark."

"Andrew here would lend us a lantern."

"I'll get one out of the barn an' go up with you. Or I can show him the way in the mornin'" — turning to Peters.

Peters looked disappointed.

"It is entirely unnecessary," said Stephen. "I know where the place is. I can find my own way and need trouble no one."

"I could go up with you any time before eight, if so be's you're an early riser," said Peters.

"It's no trouble," said Garrett. "I ain't got nothin' particular to do to-morrow. I can show ye up at any time."

"Gentlemen," said Stephen, "you must forgive me for refusing your kindness. But I desire to go up to the house for the first time alone. I know the way and I will have no one with me. You understand? Now, Mr. Peters, here is Mr. Bryan's order for the key and I will sign a receipt for it on the back if you

wish, and Mrs. Garrett, if you can give me a light and tell me where my room is, I think I'll go to bed."

And this was the beginning of Stephen Eltringham's unpopularity in Winnesook.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW ELTRINGHAM TAKES POSSESSION AND PROPOSES TO HIMSELF AN ELABORATE FUTURE

STEPHEN lay awake until midnight, listening to the creek, trying to make out what it was trying to tell to a heedless world. Then he fell into a deep sleep, to awake with a start at six.

Waiting for breakfast on the veranda, in the chill morning air, he studied his house under a new aspect, flooded with the light of the eastern sun. Heavy mists hovered over the mountains but the woods at their base were intensely green. The old house, with every shutter closed, looked accidental in the picture; but some clumps of dogwood and a few peonies in flaming blossom growing before it conquered the frigidity of the old stone pile and offered a joyous invitation.

Stephen's spirits rose. He went through ten minutes of up-to-date gymnastics, looked over the copy of the Wiltwick "Agriculturist and Quarryman," three weeks old, with which Garrett had been improving his mind, and then stepped in to a hearty breakfast, in spite of the bacon swimming in fat and the eggs fried too hard without being browned.

Mrs. Garrett waited on him with her choicest allurements, and he rewarded her with compliments broad enough for her taste and innuendoes which filled her with unholy hopes. When his appetite was satisfied, he abruptly picked up his hat and walking stick, and, without a word, started up the road.

Conscious that eyes were upon him from every window within range, he walked more than deliberately, with his own eyes for the most part on the road, flicking an occasional stone with his stick. It was a short quarter of a mile, up grade. He spent five minutes covering the distance. He almost felt as if he wanted to put off the event. He presently forgot the eyes watching him in a sort of confusion of sentiments, which he tried in vain to regulate. At last he was there, and he was turning to the right to enter the gap in the fence, when suddenly the voice of the night before, sweet but trivial, singing the same air, broke the stillness behind him. He turned sharply with an angry frown. The annoyance and the frown vanished instantaneously.

The girl was pretty, almost handsome, rather tall and young enough to be still thought lithe, though a couple of years after marriage most likely one would say loose jointed. Her sallow face was framed in a mass of dark, straight hair. Her lips were unnaturally scarlet. Her black eyes glittered. Those who knew her said that the sheen in them was like that of water in the depths of a well; but Stephen only caught the luminosity and not the iciness this morn-

ing. He noticed — he was an artist and a young man — that her uncorseted figure had its charms and that her hands were abnormally long, frail, and white. She was perhaps twenty-two and her dress was absolutely poor.

She gave him a cunning smile as he took her in from head to foot.

“Good morning, Ruth,” said he.

“Good morning, Stephen,” was her reply with a laugh.

“You’re a good guesser, Ruth.”

“I ain’t’s big a fool’s I look” — rustic repartee is nothing if not delicate.

“And now, I suppose you’ve come to see the show.”

“Where’s the show?”

“Why, to see me take possession of the old place.”

“I don’t know’s I was thinkin’ o’ you until I see you goin’ up the road ahead o’ me. Then I thought I’d wake you up a bit. I’m goin’ over to Marthy Woodbury’s t’ help her sew. I must be hurryin’. So long!”

“Good morning,” said Stephen, and he watched her idly as she struck into a path between the bushes and tripped down the slope towards the creek.

When she was out of sight, the sweet trivial voice came back, still in the same song, a gay, unmeaning little ditty. Then it, too, was lost in the distance, and Stephen, who had fallen into a sort of idle daze, woke up and started along the path to his house. He no-

ticed the ground was overrun with weeds. Hosea Eltringham had died in February; it had taken some time to locate Stephen; and the place had run wild all spring. The unplanted furrows of last year were half hidden by a green tangle amid which the cornflower and buttercup, here and there, showed their faces. Even in the path, dandelions and ragweed were struggling hard to efface the signs of man's invasion of nature.

Stephen stood and looked at the house. It was a solid rectangular block of brown and grey stone. The green window shutters were dingy and not too sound, but the shingled roof seemed in good repair. An angular hood sheltered the single rough stone step at the main entrance in the centre line of the front. The walls had been whitewashed to a height of eighteen inches from the ground, not so very long ago, and the peonies and a few other garden plants were laid out on either side of the door. The dogwood bushes were on the outer side of a cross path that ran parallel with the front of the house and turned around the corner to Stephen's left. There was no driveway in front; but on the right it came close to the northeast end of the house, and went out into the road at the eastern corner of the garden.

Noting these and other details with eager interest and already busy weaving plans, Stephen mounted the rough stone step and put the key into the lock. The unused mechanism moved unwillingly. The door half stuck on the sill. The house was filled with

the damp chill of February which had been locked into it.

Moved by an impulse of privacy Stephen closed the door behind him. He found himself practically in the dark. The rays that filtered through the crevices of the shutters were of no advantage to his eyes still full of the eight o'clock sunshine. He started across the room to open a window. He struck his knee against some object, and with a muttered "damn" stooped to move it from his path. He failed to recognize the article of furniture and stepped forward. He narrowly missed something else. Then he found an old horsehair sofa in his way and kneeling on this he opened the window and pushed back the heavy shutters. Turning around, he saw that the objects over which he had stumbled were two trestles or horses such as are used in stables. Over one was draped a square of black paper muslin. A similar square lay on the floor beside the other one.

He realized that the coffin of his dead kinsman and predecessor had rested on these during the hours before his burial and perhaps while the funeral services were being held. He sat down and gazed at them. He wondered at the fate that had brought him there to confront him with the circumstances of death so instantly on his arrival.

Then, in a sort of panic, he jumped up, opened the back door and threw the trestles out. He found a pile of old newspapers in a closet. He put them in the fireplace and set fire to them. On them he laid

the black squares and watched until they were reduced to ashes.

The blaze took some of the chill from the air and the open window had blown out some of the musty smell. He opened all the other windows in the living room, and in the two rooms which formed the north-eastern half of the house, a parlor — country style — and a bedroom. He went up stairs and finished throwing the whole establishment open to the invigoration from outdoors. Then he gave himself up to a minute consideration of the premises — not the furniture or other contents — they were squalid and commonplace and without sentimental association so far as he was concerned — but the house itself, the rooms, their situation, their possibilities of adaptation to his half formed plans.

The villagers watched him appear at window after window, look out, and then disappear again. They wondered what he could be doing so long by himself in the house. They wondered if he had information of hidden money and was looking for it.

As a matter of fact, his spirits rose as the morning went on. He framed an elaborate scheme in his mind. Going back to the living room, he produced a carpenter's rule, a pad and a pencil from his pocket, and the next three hours he spent measuring, figuring, ruling out diagrams and making free hand sketches, until at last, a little before noon, he got up from the table, stretched himself and began whistling gayly, while he gathered up the results of his work

and carefully pocketed them, touching a match to the wisp of spoiled sheets and seeing that they burned to a tinder in the fireplace.

"Yes," he said to himself, "I believe that will do," and leaving the windows wide open, he came out, locked the door, lit a cigarette and, after a five minutes' inspection of the barn, strolled smoking and in high good humor down to the road. He was half annoyed when the sweet, trivial voice rippled again out of the wood across the way, in the same gay, unmeaning little ditty. He waited, however, until the girl came up the bank and out from between the trees.

"It seems to me my entrances and exits here are set to music," said he, "and you're the band."

"D'ye like music?" said the girl. "I love it. I'm savin' up to buy an organ. I've got twenty-five dollars. Marthy Woodbury'll sell me hers for thirty-five dollars. Only don't tell father. He'd half kill me 'n take the money."

"Lucky you warned me. I might have blabbed if I ever made the old gentleman's acquaintance."

"Oh, everyone knows pop," said she. "You'll know him right away ef you stop here."

The two were now strolling slowly towards the village on opposite sides of the road.

"So you thought I was Winnesook," remarked Stephen after a pause.

"Yes, I think you're like an Indeen only you're too fair and you've blue eyes."

Stephen thought of the brachycephalous, splay-nosed specimens he had seen and was not flattered. Then he remembered that probably her notion of the Indian type was based on popular pictures of Osceola, Hiawatha and other legendary and semi-legendary heroes, in which they are usually depicted as phenomenally tall and straight with fine Latin features and haughty expressions.

"But what put Winnesook into your head?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm always thinkin' of him. I think he's grand. I'd love to have him for a beau. Ef ever I marry, I want him to be an Indeen."

"You might have a sad awakening."

"I dunno. I'm half Indeen myself, you know."

"Hardly half."

"Oh, mebbe not. Part Indeen anyhow. It must be strong in me, I feel it so." Then after a considerable pause: "You come from New York. Kind o' different from this, ain't it?"

"Well, rather! Ever been to New York yourself?"

"No, never. I don't know as I'd like it either. It must be terrible to live in such a crowd. Onct I spent a week down to Wiltwick, and even there, small a place as they say it is, I felt as ef I was suffocatin'. I'd die soon away from the mountains."

"You're a queer girl."

"Now, why do you say that? It's what they all say and it makes me mad. What's queer about me?"

Is it because I think about somethin' else besides the pigs an' chickens?"

"I beg your pardon for the word. I used it in the loose, everyday sense. What I meant was unusual — an unusual girl. It seems to me as if there might be a touch of genius about you — in a small way."

"I don't know what that means. But I hate to be thought queer. I don't mind them as their opinion's of no account, nohow. But you look different from them" — and she made a sweeping gesture which seemed to include the whole village in her contempt.

"Thanks," said Stephen quite sincerely. He felt the compliment was worth while. "Here we part. Good day."

And he stepped into the Winnesook House to encounter the hazards of boiled dinner as interpreted by Mrs. Garrett, not to speak of the blandishments with which she seasoned it.

After he had dined, Stephen started inquiries as to the means for building operations which the village afforded. Garrett advised him without reserve to go to old Enos Fairweather, the village carpenter, who had put up half the buildings erected in a twenty mile radius in the last quarter century.

"He won't charge you more 'n double a fair profit unless he thinks you're clean daft," said Garrett, "and his work is first rate — lasts forever."

"Good," said Stephen, "I'll go to him."

"The only trouble," Garrett went on, "is that

you'll find him a little mulish, a little hard to get started."

"Oh, will I?" said Stephen. "Well, isn't there some other carpenter about here?"

"Yes, indeed; there's Heber Latimer down to Cross Roads. He's 'most as good as Fairweather, but he's slower — that is after he's started, and he ain't got no money. You'd have to pay for everything as you went along. Mebbe, however, you'd save on that as he couldn't put on too thick. Was you goin' to hev much of a job done?"

"Don't be afraid. Nobody will overcharge me," said Stephen, evasively. "I'm no fool even if I am an artist. Which of them talks most?"

"Well, I don't know as there bes much difference in that. We're all kind o' open up here. We don't keep no secrets like. We ain't got nothin' to hide. But I suppose as Latimer spreads things around most. He goes both to the saloon and to meetin' and Fairweather only goes to meetin'. Shall I drive out with you to Fairweather's? Mebbe he'd go to work to onct ef I asked him. He's my wife's uncle."

"Oh, no, thanks. I have several calls to make, and I would be only wasting your time. I would like, however, to hire your horse and buggy for a couple of hours if you're not going to use it. How much will it be?"

"Would a dollar — and a half be too much?"

It certainly would not. Stephen had half expected to pay five. He was accustomed to New

York livery men. It was a fortunate lesson to him. He kept it in mind all afternoon, and on a rough estimate, it saved him \$500. There is nothing like knowing the standard of the community in which you are doing business.

Stephen's first call was at the sawmill at the lower end of the village. After an hour's talk, he left behind him certain sketches and specifications and an order which made the proprietor rub his hands. Then he drove to Fairweather's home, about a mile out the Wiltwick Road. Fairweather was mending the strap of his daughter's sewing machine while she nursed her baby. He was interested when Stephen told him who he was. He was still more interested when he saw the plans and sketches for the proposed work. He was an enthusiast in his trade, and like many a countrymen had a touch of the artist in him. He felt the job would be a pleasant one, and he was shrewd enough to see that Stephen would be a poor subject for extortion. He offered terms so fair that the bargain was made without dispute or delay.

"Well, you'll begin work to-morrow morning," said Stephen, chipperly, rising to go.

Fairweather stiffened up.

"To-morrow?" said he, "To-morrow morning? I dunno's I kin. I guess I won't be ready to start 'fore next Monday or mebbe the middle o' next week."

"Ah," replied Stephen, with an air of deep regret. "That's very sad. I did hope you'd take the job."

"Well, ain't I takin' it?"

"I don't know. You see I can't wait. There's a lot to do and it must be finished before the end of the month. I know it won't be quite the same thing; but I'm afraid I'll have to go over to Cross Roads and see Heber Latimer. They tell me he isn't busy and would start work this afternoon if I gave him a little cash."

This was a bitter shot. Fairweather quailed before it. His jealousy of Latimer was even stronger than his love of contradiction. He wavered. But the idea of giving way to this cool, urgent young dandy from the city — of course Stephen had maintained his pose of indifference throughout the interview — was almost too much.

"I can't be hurried," he said doubtfully. "I have other work on hand that I must get rid of first."

Then his daughter came to the rescue. Stephen had found favor in her eyes.

"What other work have you, pop?" she put in.

This was the question he had feared. He was visibly put out.

"Why," said he, hesitating, "I be a-goin' to put new shingles on the barn an' mend the doors o' the carriage shed; and, then, I was a-thinkin' o' buildin' a verandy for you'n the baby out in front."

"That's kind of you, pop. You're all right. But why don't you hire Latimer to do them odd jobs and you get at this man's work to-morrow?"

Stephen rewarded his ally with a smile at which

she reddened to her ears, not without smiling too. The old man confessed he was struck with the idea, and after interminable "mebbes" he agreed to meet Stephen on the Eltringham lot at seven o'clock the next morning with men and material and appliances of all sorts.

And so it came to pass that the village of Winnesook was supplied with more excitement in the succeeding three weeks than it had known in a century. The noise of hammering, sawing and planing scared the birds away from the neighborhood. Changes visible and invisible to passers-by supplied endless gossip for the residents.

At first, it was assumed that the house and all belonging to it were public property. Men strolled up at all times of the day to look over the work and ask questions about it. But Stephen was usually somewhere around, and with his caustic tongue and calmly insulting manner he made the situation too unpleasant for the majority of his visitors. One or two who proved thick skinned, he bluntly ordered off the place.

Of course, the workmen were pumped dry every evening as to the day's proceedings but they could tell nothing beyond mechanical facts — that white maple floors were being laid throughout the house, that the walls and ceilings were being sheathed and paneled, and the parlor and bedroom in the northeast half downstairs were being converted into one large room, just like the living room. What the ultimate

purpose of any part of the work might be, they knew no more than the villagers themselves. Even regarding the principal item in the remodelling of the old place, the great unconcealable outdoor structure, which filled all observers with wonder, they could give no explanation. What it was for, why it was built or what it was to cost, they could tell no more than Andrew Garrett or Deacon Van Camp or Schoolmaster Martin Peters, to all of whom Stephen was pleasant and friendly but stonily reticent.

CHAPTER V

AN ARTIST BUILDS AND HIS NEIGHBORS NURSE THEIR WRATH

THE structure which excited so much wonder was nothing more nor less than a thirty foot square pavilion which Stephen had erected in front of the western half of the old house. The very first day, workmen began digging foundations and running up a rough stone basement to the level of the living room floor, while others cut down the windows to the same level converting them into doors. Then the material began to arrive from the sawmill and, while several carpenters specially imported from Wiltwick started on the new panels and floors inside the house, repairing shutters and window sashes and generally renovating, the neighborhood men, with a couple of laborers to help, set up the great timber pillars at the corners of the new structure and on each side of the entrances on the three open sides. Then the frame work for the pyramidal roof was hoisted into place, joists were put in and shingles nailed on. The sides were framed up hip high and paneled, and a massive cornice was run around the edge of the roof, turned up at the corners in flaring

curves as in an old Chinese picture. The apex of the pyramid was topped off with a pagoda ornament of eccentric design. Inside, the ceiling and walls were sheathed with narrow planking.

The only person who ventured to ask Stephen directly what it was, was Ruth Freer.

"It's a joss house," said he.

Naturally, the next morning everybody knew that it was a joss house, and when the schoolmaster had looked it up and circulated the information that a joss house was a Chinese temple or shrine, sacred to Buddhist or other idolatrous worship, the scandal was convulsive. There were some who dimly perceived that Stephen was laughing at them, but, about the time the joss house was roofed in and Fairweather and his forces were busy finishing the interior, two horribly heathenish little Japs came up one afternoon from Wiltwick with their sailor's canvas bags, behind Consecrated Swope's limping horse, and took up quarters with Stephen. So even the doubters had to give way, and the awful rumor got abroad that Stephen belonged to one of those exotic pagan sects about which flamboyantly illustrated articles often appeared in New York Sunday newspapers. The depraving influence of the yellow supplements, be it remembered, reaches the most sequestered regions of the country.

Along with the Japs, arrived the painters. They came from New York — eight or ten of them. Then the scandal degenerated into ridicule. The shingles

and the great supporting pillars of the pavilion were left their natural color, but the steps, ledges, side barrier, flaring corner pieces and pagoda finial flamed out in vivid scarlet liberally striped and ornamented with gold leaf.

Stephen when he viewed the brilliant splash of color amid the green and grey of the woods and rocks had a thrill of artistic delight. It was just what the picture needed. He hailed himself a benefactor to nature. Visitors from the city always thought so too. But to the rustic mind it was like a merry-go-round which had come with a circus to Halestown. It became famous over the countryside as a sample of citified craziness. People drove ten miles of a Sunday to look at it and jeer at it. The laughter was inextinguishable, and Stephen became almost popular for a short time, so convinced the natives grew that they were even with him for his superior airs.

The wonders, the oddities, the mingled absurdities and glories — as the village viewed them — of the interior of the house kept curiosity and gossip busy and soon got the tempers of the men and some of the women — the older and uglier ones — on edge. The descriptions extracted from the workmen and the reports of the few, to whom actual business errands had afforded a glimpse, stimulated the villagers' desire to see, each for him or herself. But nobody dared face Stephen on a pure prying expedition, and

during his frequent trips to the city, the two Japs proved equally forbidding. They could not be bribed or cajoled, and their supernatural strength was part of the gospel of the tavern.

It was this way. One fine afternoon Consecrated Swope's big truck, drawn by his two best horses, came rumbling up the road from Wiltwick, laden with a great packing case of plain boards, and well known pattern, stenciled all over with the name of a great New York piano firm. One of the things that Stephen could almost do was play the piano. Had he given purpose and industry to it he might have become a virtuoso, just as he might have been a painter had he put purpose and industry into his brush.

As Swope advanced along the village street, he stopped at one place after another and asked for help. When he reached the wagon way at the entrance of Stephen's lot, he had twelve men with him.

Stephen came out to meet them.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Swope," said he — Swope had brought up a good many loads in the last two weeks — "so here's the piano."

"Yes, sir, yes, Mr. Eltringham. Here it is. I hope we can handle it sir," — Stephen was very liberal pay, and Swope, who didn't live in Winnesook, had a profound respect for him. "But I'm fearsome it's an awful load."

"Oh, I imagine it's all right," said Stephen.

"These men are with you, are they not?"—and he waved his hand at the posse comitatus. "There are surely enough of you."

"I hope so," said Swope, "but I'm none too sure."

"But you got it on the wagon, so I suppose you can get it off again."

"Well you see, the railroad men helped get it on; they're accustomed t' handlin' such things, and there was six of them."

Then Swope and his assistants tackled the job. Stephen watched them with a provoking smile while they tugged and heaved and sweated. He was really in consternation when the great case slid out on the skids and toppled one way or other, as the efforts of the mob of countrymen were injudiciously exerted. But Stephen would not appear to care, for the world. He never even made a suggestion or uttered a warning.

When at last one end of the case touched the ground and the rest of it was lowered by driving the cart ahead and pulling out the skids, his only remark was:

"Lucky thirteen."

This was said with an air of ironical compliment which did not endear him to the company.

"Where is it to go, Mr. Eltringham?" asked Swope, mopping his forehead.

"Oh, just up there on the pavilion and into the room behind," said Stephen, as if he were talking of carrying a carpet bag.

"I don't believe as we could ever do it," said Swope.

"No?" said Stephen. "I imagine you could if you went about it in the right way."

The men held a long conference. Stephen walked away. They tried the case where it stood on the soft ground. It seemed immovable.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Eltringham," said Swope at last, approaching Stephen who had taken a seat on the pavilion steps, "I'm goin' up to the head of the Notch to Mr. Seaman's for a trunk to take to the station, and I'll be back around six o'clock. The men'll all be done work then, and we can get some more help, and we'll come up and get it in somehow. How'll that do?"

"Excellently," said Stephen. "There's no hurry. Suit yourself."

So the "lucky thirteen" retreated, and Swope started up the mountain road, much troubled over the problem ahead of him.

As soon as they were out of sight, Stephen took the situation in hand. Calling his Japs to his aid with a couple of rollers, a crowbar and the same old pair of trestles from the barn, he quickly rolled the big case close up to the pagoda steps and extracted the piano. Lifting the instrument, one end at a time, from step to step with the aid of the trestles, the trio soon landed it on the pagoda floor. Then they rolled it into the living room. Finally, they nailed up the case again and put it back where Swope

and his party had left it, removing from the ground all the machinery by which they had accomplished their feat.

In the evening, as Stephen was smoking on the pavilion steps after supper, he saw a formidable procession coming up the road, headed by Swope. One man carried a block and hoisting tackle. Two or three had crowbars. There were twenty-two of them altogether. Stephen waited coolly until they reached the foot of the steps.

"We've kem to put in the pie-anna," announced Swope.

"Oh, have you?" said Stephen. He was going to add that they were too late; but two young fellows who had been telling the new recruits what a fearful weight the instrument was, started to illustrate by putting their shoulders to the case and exerting their really colossal strength to lift it. The empty case weighed only a hundred pounds or so, and at the first push gave way so suddenly, tumbling over on its broad back, that the two young giants went sprawling on the ground, clutching handfuls of the soft earth in their hands, and kicking each other's shins before they came to a full stop.

When the panic subsided, Stephen explained in his very coolest way that the piano was already in the house.

"Who put it in?" asked Swope, in incredulous amazement.

"Oh," said Stephen, indifferently, "my two little Jap boys."

"Them two little Chinks?" stammered Swope. "How in the Land o' Canaan did they do it?"

"Just picked it up and carried it in," said Stephen in an explanatory tone, as if it were a mere trifle.

"Gosh!" said Swope.

"You gentlemen must be thirsty," Stephen went on. "It's a warm walk up from the village. You would like some beer, no doubt." He stepped to the house door and shouted, "Haribe! Ikumura!"

The two little Japs came with their funny, hurried waddle from the two room shack some fifteen feet in the rear of the house which had been built for kitchen and servants' quarters.

"Bring out a case of beer and some glasses," said he.

And while the crowd gulped down the beer and marvelled at the thin engraved goblets with their quaint lotos form and slender stems, he went on: "Haribe, I have been telling these gentlemen how you and Ikumura carried in the piano to-day, just picked it up and carried it in."

He looked straight at the Japs first one and then the other. An innocent smile illumined the swarthy faces.

"Oh, yeays; pick him up an cauwy him een," said Haribe.

"Cauwy him een," repeated Ikumura.

"Maybe you think they're not strong." Stephen ran on. He was enjoying the surprise and humiliation of the "natives." "Do any of you gentlemen wrestle? Would you like to try a fall with Haribe?"

The crowd were interested. They opened out and made a circle around a big young fellow, who seemed none too willing.

"Come, Haribe, don't be afraid," said Stephen, "the gentleman won't hurt you. Just show him a little Jiu Jitsu."

The Jap grinned. He stepped out. The villager had to stoop to grasp him by the shoulders. The two swayed a moment or two. The Jap gave a little twist and jumped back while his adversary assumed a sitting posture with an emphasis that made his teeth rattle.

He got up full of wrath.

"I'd hit him for that," remarked Stephen mischievously.

The Jap advanced, his arms raised in awkward pugilistic style.

"Let him have it," said Stephen, "hit him hard."

The rustic was just in the temper to take advantage of the hint. He saw his adversary was no boxer. He hardly took the trouble to spar a moment, when he threw his whole weight into a blow aimed straight for Haribe's nose. The village champion never knew how it happened. He could only tell that he felt a jerk given to his arm and something tripped him. He reeled and staggered and landed with the mo-

mentum of a battering ram in a group of spectators, bringing three of them to the ground in a heap and falling on top of them.

"That's not fair fighting," he roared as he scrambled to his feet.

"No," replied Stephen, cooler than ever. "That's the worst of these Japs. They don't care anything about style. They only fight to win. Thirsty work gentlemen! Have some more beer, or would anyone like to tackle Ikumura?"

Ikumura was not as popular as the beer, which went around again. The crowd showed signs of lingering.

"Well, gentlemen, I won't keep you any longer," said Stephen, pleasantly. "It was more than kind of you to come up. I am greatly obliged. Good night Mr. Swope; good night Mr. Garrett; good night gentlemen all — and thanks."

They retreated very crestfallen. There was just one thing had brought them up. They had hoped to get into the house as escorts to the piano. They had not even set foot in the pavilion. They had hardly got a peep through the open door. Their strength had been made seem ridiculous. They had been coolly mocked and calmly dismissed when the offensive stranger was tired of mocking them. They were thoroughly sulky. They had not even the consolation of flouting the crestfallen champion, for they only too plainly recognized that his disaster was a studied insult to them all.

Oddly enough, Stephen himself was not in specially good humor when it was all over. He had no illusions as to the smallness of the part he had played. The piano joke was all right, but he was sorry for the wrestling match. He went to bed in bad spirits, angry at himself.

The incident, however, made his premises as safe from intrusion in his absence as when he was on the spot. No one in Winnesook ever again thought of trying conclusions with a Jap.

The indignation over the general exclusion was not diminished by one or two side incidents.

One evening — one of many evenings on which Stephen met Ruth Freer near the opening in the stone fence, she greeted him with the remark:

“That’s a grand pie-anna ye’ve got up there.”

“No, it’s an upright,” said Stephen.

“I dunno what you mean by that; but I mean it sounds grand. You play grand too.”

The piano had made a sensation in Winnesook. When its luscious music flooded the village atmosphere with palpitating joy, men and women stood breathless at their doors to listen. Leonidas Lefferts, the one-armed thinker of Winnesook, Ruth Freer, and not a few others, stole up the road in the twilight and stood in the shadow of the wood to listen. Some of the music puzzled, some of it delighted them. They responded at once to Strauss and Offenbach — whom Stephen, not being a prig, reveled in playing — they were caught with the tenderness of Lassen’s

songs and the delicate sprightliness of Czibulka. The "Fantaisie Impromptu," the "Liebeslied," Grieg's "Papillon," some Liszt transcriptions and sundry Wagnerian adaptations seemed, at first, mere jargon of sweet sound, mere craziness like the red and gold pavilion. But, after a while, a few began to detect and follow the rhythms, and one or two like Lefferts and Ruth, to love them. Stephen, in a word, furnished a musical education to the village or to so much thereof as was capable of acquiring one. But he was quite unconscious of all this. Display of his personal accomplishments was not one of his faults. He played because his craving for music forced him to do so. It never occurred to him that in the silence of the country evening the sound could be heard nearly a mile away. So when Ruth told him that his piano and his playing were "grand" he was astonished. He was also intensely pleased.

"Oh, do you think so?" he replied to her. "Yes, I think it is a very fine piano. I am glad you like my playing too, Ruth. I didn't know you could hear it out here. Wouldn't you like to come up and listen at closer range. Any time you like, you are welcome. It will give me great pleasure to play for you. I rather think you are worth playing for—in more senses than one."

"Me go up there? I dassent."

"Why not? Afraid of the women's tongues?"

"Me afraid of them?"—same old contemptuous indication of the village. "You don't know me."

"Well then, why won't you come up? Come along now. I'm not busy."

"I dassent."

"You dassent! why dassent you?"

"I don't know; but I dassent. They say it's sudden death you know, and I'd hate to die before I've thought a lot of things."

"What's sudden death?"

"Why, for anyone o' the name o' Freer to go up to the old Eltringham house. Pop wouldn't work a day for you or even go on your lot, not ef you made him a present o' the town o' Wiltwick."

"So? That's strange. Do you know the reason?"

"No. Some old story I guess. Most likely it's nonsense. But what's the use o' takin' the chance? Mebbe I'll come up'n see you some time when I want to die."

But, if she was afraid to accept the invitation, Ruth was keenly alive to the annoyance which the preference shown her would cause in the village. It took less than a day for every soul in the place to know all about it, with various trimmings, and the next evening Annie Garrett threw herself in Stephen's way and praised his playing in the hope he might make an exception in her favor too. But he didn't.

CHAPTER VI

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM DINES OUT

ABOUT the same time that the piano arrived, Stephen Eltringham, walking down to the sawmill one day, became aware of Virginia Seaman and her mother coming towards him in a buggy. "Only a little girl," he said to himself and the recollection brought a quizzical smile to his face.

As he took off his hat, the ladies exchanged a word and Virginia pulled up the horse. Stephen stepped to the side of the buggy.

"Mamma," said she, with the accent on the second syllable, "this is Mr. Eltringham, whom we met last week on the Border Road."

Her face colored like a rose garden in June.

The older lady leaned across her daughter and held out her hand to Stephen. She was a mother to do any daughter credit, handsome, thoughtful, kindly, still in her prime and promising a gracious and genial decline.

"We all know you very well already, Mr. Eltringham," said she, "Charley Mayhew's father was my first cousin. We are really cousins you see, though he has always called me aunt; I suppose on account

of the difference in age. Mr. Seaman, you probably know, is executor of his father's will along with his mother."

"Yes, Mr. Eltringham, I forgot to tell you how much he talked of you," Virginia exclaimed.

"Charley has often spoken of you," said Stephen. "I remember that he was up here visiting you last summer."

"Charley has made us wish to know you very much. He speaks so interestingly about you and your work. You have at least one hearty admirer, Mr. Eltringham," said Mrs. Seaman.

"That's Charley's foolish partiality, Mrs. Seaman," Stephen replied laughing, and not without a flush. "He is the most obstinate fellow in his prejudices I ever met."

"Don't say a word against Charley," interrupted Virginia. "I love Charley."

A wise young man would have taken this as conclusive proof that she did not love him — assuming that such young man had any right to concern himself in the state of her affections. But wisdom deserted Stephen just then. An unwarranted pang of jealousy shot through him and his face fell. The girl noticed it.

"Don't you love him too?" she asked gaily. "I tell you he loves you."

Stephen recovered himself partially.

"Yes, we love each other like brothers," said he, "and wrangle like brothers every time we meet."

"That's the way Genia loves him too," said Mrs. Seaman. "It is one continuous spat all the time they are together."

"Mamma, that's hardly fair. I don't think Charley spats much with me."

"No, poor boy; it's a one-sided war."

It was Virginia's day for vivisection. She put her head on one side with her very simplest air and asked ravishingly: "Don't you really like Charley, Mr. Eltringham?"

This is the most uncomfortable question that one man can be asked about another. The man who will voluntarily extol his friend's good qualities by the hour becomes awkward and self-conscious when called upon to do so. Stephen adopted the plan of superlative praise. He overdid it almost enough to seem insincere. There was a hiatus in the interview.

Mrs. Seaman came to the rescue. "I hear you are making great changes," said she.

"Oh, yes," said Stephen, "I hope you will favor me some day by coming to see them. I believe I may ask you in the country."

"We shall all be delighted, Mr. Eltringham. We are dying with curiosity to see what an artist's country house will be like."

The two or three villagers who had stopped with unblushing inquisitiveness, under the flimsiest of pretenses, reported the invitation and the acceptance, and the doubtful question was settled whether Stephen

was a sort of hermit, or whether his love of seclusion only held good against native Winnesook.

Stephen received by mail an invitation to dine with the Seamans the following Sunday, when the head of the house would be enjoying his weekly visit from New York. Of course, he went. He hired Garrett's horse and buggy and drove slowly up the Notch road under the noon sun. He lay back under the canopy. He let the horse have his own way, while he immersed his senses in the luxuriance of the June woods and the purity of the June sky and let his thinking powers lie fallow. The horse, as it breasted the steep mountain road, gave the buggy a swaying motion, and Stephen almost fell asleep. The creek far below gurgled a lullaby. The light breezes hushed the leaves. The birds hardly twittered in the hot golden air. Nature paid homage to the sun in voiceless rapture. Stephen felt rather than observed the glory of the hour. Besides, he was enjoying that dreamy lassitude, which is the pleasant form that hunger takes with the well-fed. He was too lazy to notice anything in particular when a shout aroused him to the realities of life.

"Hallo, Stephen!" a voice exclaimed, and he sat up straight in the buggy.

A few yards ahead of him on the road were Virginia Seaman and Charley Mayhew. They looked as if they had been sent out of the atelier of Providence to animate the moment.

Virginia's dress might have been fashioned out of

a summer cloud. She was bareheaded, and her pink parasol bathed her face in a lovely glow.

Charley Mayhew was bareheaded too. His blue jacket was thrown open with a dash which was not theatrical because he could not help it. The breeze played in the light curls of his hair, and the raised chin and upturned face gave him the effect of looking in the face of the sun like an eagle.

Stephen, as he sat up in the buggy, was silent for a moment, amazed at the perfection of the picture — not without a strange note of dismay somewhere deep down in him. Then, as the two began merrily taxing him with his sleepiness, his own gaiety awoke. He drew up the horse, and jumped out, shook hands and defended himself bravely. "Asleep? Not a bit of it. I was planning a picture."

"Dreaming it," suggested Charley.

"Yes, of course. Every picture worth painting is a dream."

"Well, I'm sorry we awoke you, Mr. Eltringham, if we spoiled your picture," said Virginia.

"Not at all, Miss Seaman; you know dreams are always most vivid in the moment of waking, and just as I saw you two I finished the sketch."

"Did you? What will it be?"

"The call to dinner," suggested Charley.

"Charley, I hate you. What will it be, Mr. Eltringham?"

"Well, I haven't given it a name yet, but it will be something about summer, you know."

"Will we be in it?"

"You will anyway."

"Oh, will I? Won't that be lovely. Now, Mr. Eltringham, that's a promise. I'll hold you to it. Put Charley in it too, won't you?"

"Maybe I'll hide him somewhere in the background where it is very green."

"Put me out in the sun."

"Truly, with a pink glory about your head. I'll call you a 'Princess of Sunshine.'"

"Oh, how lovely! That's the very nicest thing I have ever had said to me. You will paint it, surely; won't you?"

"It's too good to lose."

Then came a brief dispute as to the order of march.

"Virginia will go in the carriage with you, Stephen," suggested Charley.

"Oh, I won't spoil your walk; you get in with her and drive up. I will walk almost as fast. I will be right up with you."

Virginia ended the dispute.

"I'll tell you," said she; "I won't let either of you boys ride in the carriage with me. I am the Princess of Sunshine, and I will ride alone, in state. You are to be my guards, and you will walk one on each side. And you must remember I am a princess and talk nicely to me."

A fancy seized her. She ran to the roadside, and twisted a great green bough from a bush.

"Put it over the buggy top," said she giving it to Eltringham.

The two men caught the idea. Pen knives were out, and in a few minutes every part of the vehicle and harness, to which a branch could be fastened, was decked with green. Stephen found a clump of dogwood, and piled a mass of blossoms in front of the dashboard. Mayhew dragged green tendrils out of the wood, and wound them about the reins, before he handed them to the girl, who sat radiant under the canopy as in a bower.

Then the horse again lowered his head and slowly mounted the heart breaking incline, Stephen stepped to his right, and marched beside him with his vigorous tread while Charley, on the left, wheeled around, with his characteristic unconcerned swing.

They proceeded some minutes in silence. Stephen turned and smiled at the girl. She sat upright, a pretty expression of pride mingling with her smiles. As he looked into her face, that intoxicating mist of light again came out of her eyes and seemed to veil them.

Stephen felt an indescribable thrill of pleasure. He laughed a little as he turned away. It was all he could do not to break out singing.

The girl, meanwhile, was experiencing a delight too intense for expression. It was a delight that only comes to some girls, and to these only once in their lives.

It was the first time that a full grown man had

ever paid homage to her young womanhood — to her beauty, her sweetness, the ineffable promise of the bud just opening into bloom. Whether Charley admired her or not, she did not know and did not care. He had been brought up with her almost; he was — well, say a brother to her, and they teased each other still like boy and girl.

But this tall, handsome artist, with his fine face, his eloquent eye, his assured manner, winning voice and crisp habit of speech, was the first comer into her life from that great outside world, of which every girl dreams. He was a man of the world. That was the point above all, and he admired her and did homage to her. She did not say so to herself, but she felt it, she knew it and the pleasure of it ran through her veins like wine. Virginia had often told people that she was “only a little girl”; it was an affectionate quotation from her father’s lavish endearments. It had represented her own feeling too. But, after this morning, she never said it again. A new pride had come to her.

Presently Stephen broke the silence.

“How goes the practice of the law, Charley?” he asked.

“Very promising indeed, Stephen. If I had a few clients and a few cases, I’d be almost busy.”

“How about old Gruber’s lawsuit?”

“Got judgment.”

“From whom?”

“Judge Brinkerhoff.”

"He's always reversed. The other side will appeal."

"No such luck."

"I rather gather that the fee was not contingent."

"No need to ask when you find me up here."

"And how about the Hexamer will?"

"Admitted to probate."

"The next of kin will contest."

"Wrong again. There is only one person who would have any interest in a contest, and the widow has made a will leaving him everything."

"Who is he?"

"Why, I believe I am. She's my aunt."

Virginia Seaman had paid very little attention to this dialogue; but she just caught that it was about matters legal. Now Virginia had a score to pay. Charley had made her feel very young a couple of times in the course of the morning. So she interrupted with an air of simplicity altogether too convincing not to be assumed.

"Mr. Eltringham, do you see any use in lawyers?"

"Not the slightest," Stephen replied upon the spot, without so much as smiling.

Charley laughed heartily, showing his splendid white teeth.

Virginia had to laugh too. But she went on:

"No, really, I mean it. Don't you think it's much nobler for a man to be a soldier or a sailor or something —"

"Something equally effective. Dynamiter, for in-

stance. Certainly I do. Nothing like recognizing true utility."

"What about artists?" rashly interjected Charley.

"Oh, artists are splendid. I love artists. How would you like it if there were no pictures?"

"I guess I could live without them."

"Well, I guess everyone else could live without lawyers trying to make them pay money they don't owe or send them to prison for things they didn't do."

"Right you are Virginia. It would be a great world if we could get along without lawyers."

The arrival of the cortege at the Seamans' garden gate put a stop to the discussion. Mr. Seaman came from the porch and out on the road.

"A belated May Queen?" he called out to Virginia.

"No, papa," she replied, peeping from under the canopy, "the Princess of Sunshine."

He took off his hat and bowed low, with a beaming face.

Charley Mayhew helped Virginia out of the buggy, while Stephen came around the horse's head.

Yesterday, she would have left the presentation ceremony to Charley. To-day, she put on a little air of dignity, which detracted nothing from her sweetness and took it upon herself.

"Papa" — accent always on the second syllable — "Mr. Eltringham."

"Already an old friend," said Mr. Seaman as they shook hands.

Stephen looked at him and liked him on the spot. He looked at Stephen and liked him too. He was a man of middle age and middle height. His hair was middling grey and he was of comfortable girth about the middle. Middleness might be said to be the prevailing characteristic of his life. He had steered a middle course in all things, held midway views on most topics and had arrived at middling results. In one thing only did he tend towards the limit of possibility, and that was in his heart. It was large above the average.

Stephen, after the interchange of a few compliments, proposed to take the horse to the nearby hotel.

"Oh, we can take care of him; Garrett's isn't he?" said Mr. Seaman, and he called, "Auguste!"

While the usual vermillion and white nondescript in top boots and blue flannel shirt led the rig away, the party were joined by Mrs. Seaman, and Stephen learned the children's names as they straggled up to shake hands with him, one by one. There was Kate, with the too much legs and arms of sixteen. Richard and Bob were say fourteen and twelve; Emily nine to ten; Maisie eight and Donald six or so.

They made a rare display of health and contentment, when seated about the dinner table in the bright room, two sides of which were open windows, overlooking the gorge. Stephen sitting at Mrs. Seaman's right just pushed the contingent belonging to that side of the table down one place, so that six year old Donald was his neighbor. Next to Donald sat

Virginia. Charley Mayhew was placed opposite to her.

After soup had been disposed of, Bob enlivened the wait by announcing triumphantly: "I know what's coming next."

"Why, Robert, I'm ashamed of you," Mrs. Seaman began, with a good imitation of a frown. But a broad smile of complicity went 'round the table.

"They've been hearing some stories about your attitude towards beefsteak, Stephen," Charley Mayhew explained, "and they're trying an experiment to find out whether you'd really rather eat grass. All the boys hope you're for grass. Don't you Bob? They'd like to see how you eat it."

"I'm sorry I left my grass teeth at home," said Stephen, and the boys grinned in various degrees.

Mr. Seaman stood up and opened impressively a bottle of Pontet Canet. When it came to Stephen, Virginia let him fill her glass as a matter of course, as did also her mother. The three elder children had table claret from another bottle, which they mixed with water. Kate whispered to the animated statue in polished bronze who waited at the table and sugar was brought her. This made the boys smile in a superior way.

"This is my way of teaching temperance," Mr. Seaman remarked in an explanatory tone. "I figure that if they learn the use of it when they are young they will not be tempted to abuse it when they grow older."

"Very good Old World view of it," Stephen replied.

"The Old World people know how to live and we don't," Mr. Seaman rejoined. "We know how to work and play, fight and die — everything but live."

"It's the hardest art of all and comes last," said Stephen. "They have been at least five thousand years practicing. You are not an American, Mr. Seaman?"

"Oh, yes, I am; but I was not born one."

The beefsteak was a dream — two inches thick, juicy and brown with the butter just melting and trickling over its edges. A great dish of mushrooms — real ones, of course — appeared simultaneously. A sense of physical well-being became diffused over all, and with it sprang up a sense of delightful intimacy.

"Cut my beefsteak for me, Mr. Eltringham," said Donald, after a brave but hopeless effort with a tin knife.

"Why, I'll do it," Virginia hastened to interpose; but Stephen felt he never liked a boy so much in his life, and would let no one come between them.

At the ice cream stage of the proceedings, the boys took second helpings as a matter of course. Kate was divided between inclination and the desire to appear grown up.

"Don't be proud, Kate, take it if you'd like it," recommended Mrs. Seaman.

"You're only a little girl, anyway. You know

you are," Richard remarked with the cheerful bluntness of the boy.

"Well, for the matter of that," Kate continued, with irrelevant emphasis, "so is Genia. She's only a little girl too."

"I am not," said Genia.

This produced a shriek of laughter.

"You're always saying you are. Didn't you tell Mr. Eltringham you were only a little girl when we met him on the hill?"

"Well, I'm not and I won't be. I'm not a little girl any more. Am I, papa?"

"I'm afraid not, my dear. It looks as if my little girl has vanished and gone away forever and ever."

"Now, papa, if you talk like that you know I'll have to sit on your knee and curl your moustache down instead of up."

This was a favorite punishment for Seaman. Only Virginia was privileged to inflict it. She had begun to do so about the time when her mother abandoned the practice. The effect was to impart to the victim's countenance a depressed and submissive appearance quite different from his usual brisk and somewhat self-satisfied expression.

"It's not your fault, Genia. It's the way of all little girls, and big ones too."

"It won't be my way, papa. I'll never, never leave you"—then with a shade of compunction—"or mamma."

"You're like all the girls, Genia. They swear

they'll stick to the old man. But presently the young one comes along and they go and get married."

"I intend never to marry."

This was said with a placid air of conviction which seemed to put it beyond the pale of doubt or argument. It was really a defiance in its way, a challenge to fate.

Virginia had not in her whole life given two consecutive minutes' thought to the matter of marriage. She had no intentions on the subject, one way or the other. But it had just come over her with a wave of astonishment that sooner or later she would marry and her instinctive impulse was not merely resistance but defiance; just as the commander of some beleaguered fortress orders his most determined sortie precisely in the hour when the vision of inevitable surrender first invades his spirit.

CHAPTER VII

THE CROSS ROADS OF DESTINY

WHEN Stephen climbed up the mountain road one evening towards the end of the week and called on the Seamans, Virginia knew that the attention was addressed equally to her mother and herself. Her mental attitude was of mingled pride and timidity. She would have been dreadfully frightened if she had had to do the honors alone. But she was one of those girls who are content to listen, and she found it happiness enough to sit by her mother in grown-up dignity and be occasionally included in the conversation by Stephen addressing his remarks directly to her. At these moments she was overjoyed to realize that she was seldom at a loss for a pretty or a sensible reply.

The occasion, besides, filled her with new admiration for her mother, whose wide range of interests and quick sympathetic faculty made every moment count agreeably. She talked travel, pictures, common acquaintances, books, the country, and never drifted into arctic zones of topic or unnavigable verbal fogs. After a little while, Charley Mayhew came in from a stroll and then she led the young men on

to talk about themselves — their acquaintance, adventures in town and country, ideals, ambitions, plans.

As one entertaining episode after another tickled the fancy, and melted into the oblivion which the kindly crave for all casual conversation, Virginia wondered if she would ever be like her mother, a woman of broad cultivation, tact and genial humor. She formed, as she listened, a resolute theory of her own deficiencies, not a painful one; she had not an iota of the morbid in her; but a good-natured, sensible one, yoked with a design to begin the improvement of her mind, for social purposes, at once.

Thus it came to pass that when Stephen had gone home and Mrs. Seaman had gone into the house, Charley Mayhew, who still sat with her on the verandah, received a mild electric shock.

"Charley," said she, in a wholly amicable tone, "I want you to tell me about lawyers. I want to know what they are really for. What do they do? What use are they?"

Charley, suspecting a ruse, looked at her out of the corner of his eye, as the light from a window fell on her face. He saw that she was not only in earnest but even eager. His first feeling was akin to shamefacedness when he attempted to frame an answer. Then a chance expression recalled from a law school lecture came into his head, and he built on it.

Flipping the ash from his cigarette with his little finger and taking a long puff designed to show how easily exposition came to him, he replied:

"Why, lawyers are a sort of soldiers. They are the fighting mercenaries of modern days. In old times a man who had the money hired a lot of fellows dressed up in tin cans to fight for him, either to help him hold on to what he'd got or get hold of something he thought he had a claim to — or would like to grab; it's the same thing. Nowadays, the feudal lord hires lawyers instead. They used to fight with swords and bullets. Now they cut and slash with sharp practice and fire hard names at each other."

"Have you much practice, Charley?"

"Not much;" — after a pause — "as much as any fellow has who's only been at it a year."

"Does papa give you any cases?"

"Oh, yes — two sorts."

?

"Ones he knows I can't lose and ones he thinks nobody can win."

Virginia laughed. "Do you ever disappoint him?"

"Oh, yes. I got judgment for sixty dollars in a suit for an unpaid freight bill. The other fellow refused to pay because some machinery was damaged on the voyage. It was just a question of who was to blame. We showed that his old traps were not properly boxed and just by accident we were able to prove positively that we kicked on taking the stuff and warned his clerk we only took it at his risk. So we won, you see."

"That was great. After all, it must be fine to be

a lawyer. You have to be smart, don't you Charley?"

Charley waved his cigarette in a gesture of deprecation. But the wings of his nostrils quivered and he colored up. Charley blushed as easily as Virginia herself. She went on:

"Papa must have been greatly pleased, Charley?"

"It was only sixty dollars."

"Yes, but he beat the other man and proved he was right. I should think he'd hate not to prove that he was right when he asked the man for money."

Charley laughed a little.

"Now, Charley, don't pretend you don't mind about honesty. I'm sure papa wouldn't ask anybody for a dollar that he hadn't a right to, and I don't believe you would either, so you needn't pretend. I'm glad the man was beaten and papa got his money."

"But he didn't."

"Now, Charley, what do you mean? You told me a minute ago that you got it for him."

"No, I only said I got judgment. That means that the court ordered him to pay, but it doesn't follow that he has paid or that he will."

"But that's dishonest. Why doesn't he pay?"

"Well, chiefly because he hasn't any money."

"Then I think it was cruel to try to make him. Maybe he's in want. His wife and children might be starving for just what you're trying to take from him. I'm surprised at papa."

Charley smiled indulgently.

"Besides, what's the use? Why do you waste your time fighting him, if you can't get any money from him?"

"We may get it some day. He won't always be broke."

"Oh, now I understand. You don't put the poor fellow in prison or anything now. You just wait till he gets rich and then you ask him to pay?"

"Well, I suppose we might let it go at that."

This and a series of similar conversations had wholly unforeseen and unpremeditated consequences. They confirmed Virginia in her theory that Charley Mayhew was only a boy and was so regarded by everyone. Her estimate of him improved; she realized that he was sincere, earnest, energetic, intelligent. But she felt that he was immature. She was able to analyze him and weigh him, place him exactly where he belonged. He was nothing like Stephen Eltringham, the realities of whose character, underneath his polished good humor, were a fascinating puzzle. There was no escaping it; Charley was still a boy, only a boy, and Virginia, after the manner of very young women, assumed an attitude of kindly superiority, a sort of rarified motherliness, towards him, than which, be it said, there is nothing more utterly hopeless as respects ulterior developments.

On the contrary, these semi-grave discussions revealed to Charley the young womanhood of Virginia, and with the discovery came the full perception of her ineffable prettiness — that exquisite blending of

strong human instinct with spirituality which glows in warmth of blood and charms in delicacy of line and which is as much finer than the thing we call beauty as the true human life is finer than the sublimations of evangelists. The young man found himself unexpectedly affected by the eager, acquisitive eyes of the girl, trying to learn from him the rules of the game of living. His tone towards her became unconsciously warm. He sought the long talks with her of his own accord. He was uneasy when she was out of his presence; in his walks through the woods and hours of lounging by the streams, her face and her firm active figure were always before him and his sub-conscious faculties interwove her in some way with whatever he thought or contrived.

Something else happened on the evening of Stephen Eltringham's first call on the Seamans. He walked slowly down the hill that night. Clouds like widow's weeds — sable with fleecy edges — were rushing across the face of the moon, driven by a tempest which was only a pleasant breeze at earth level. It was the sort of night which works on the nerves of people of excitable temperament, and Stephen felt its influence. He was strangely uneasy. He stopped and gazed out over the valley. He swept the curve of the mountains silhouetted against the sky. Then his attention was caught by the rush

of the creek so far below, and again he wondered idly what was the secret it was trying to tell. Was its mystic monition addressed to him solely, or was it bursting with the key to nature's mystery, which no one would heed?

But Stephen's excited, uneasy state was not merely the product of the wild sky conditions with which it accorded so well. The condition had become habitual with him since his arrival in the mountains, at least at times when active work about his house did not concentrate his faculties.

He seemed to experience a dissatisfaction, hitherto unknown to him, with his past career. The unrealized possibilities of his natural gifts haunted his daily thoughts in a totally unaccustomed manner, and he found the future, for the first time, present a contingent aspect of vacuity and loneliness. An unformed longing had come into his life.

Stephen Eltringham had led the life of the schools and the clubs. He was neither better nor worse than the average of young men. Like the average of young men who drink deep in the cup of experience, he was by no means spoiled for higher, purer and more serious things. He fully expected to marry, to be happy some day in domestic relations, to turn to hard work, to make a name for himself and to give to the world whatever of a message Heaven had entrusted to him. Indeed, like most young men, he had asked himself more than once as

some new feminine meteor crossed orbits with him, whether she came bearing in her breast the mandate of destiny. Yet such are the contradictions of the way we live, that now, when at last he had met the love of his life, he had no recognition of what had taken place. The germ in his blood had only produced the preliminary malaise; the flush of fever had not yet manifested itself; auto-diagnosis waited for the development of symptoms. He was in love without being aware of it.

Just as Stephen reached the arm of the Cross Clove the moon came out of the clouds for a moment. Looking across the chasm, he saw with a quiver of amazement, or thought he saw, just at the opposite angle, where the road after winding around the arm started down the hill again, a white figure flitting among the trees. He strained his eyes to make it out, but a blacker cloud than common cut off the light. With an odd superstitious sensation, he resumed his walk around the arm of the cross. In a moment other thoughts chased the phantom from his mind. But as he turned the second angle and approached the point where the figure had seemed to be, he stopped short as the sound of a girl's voice singing broke upon his ear. It was that thin, little voice, sweet but trivial, and the strain was the same gay, unmeaning little ditty, which he was now used to hearing at all sorts of unexpected times and places — none previously, however, so wierd or unexpected

as this. It was fully eleven o'clock, and as the thin, unmeaning gaiety of the song rippled out of the fecund mystery of the darkness, it seemed in its malappropriateness a sin against nature.

Stephen almost ran to the spot.

"Good God, Ruth," said he, "what are you doing here at this hour, and such a night?"

"I'm singin' to me beau down there," said she pointing over the precipice.

"Singing to your beau! What beau? There can't be anyone down there at this time of night. You must be crazy."

"Mebbe I be. I dunno. But me beau's down there for sartin. He's the Indeen, ye know. Winnesook is me beau, an' I'm goin' to marry him some day. See ef I don't."

"You queer, wild girl!"

"Now, there you be agin callin' me queer. What's queer about me? Is it because I love him instead of some o' them brutes down to the village? Or mebbe you think he ain't there. I tell you he is, an' he answers me. Listen!"

She leaned over the log barrier, and putting her hand to her lips by way of speaking trumpet screamed shrilly out of her throat:

"Win-ne-so-o-o-o-k."

A faint echo came back: "o-o-ok."

"There," she exclaimed turning excitedly to Stephen, "he calls his name back to show me he's there. Harken agin!"

Again she leaned out and screamed, "Win-ne-so-o-o-ok," more shrilly even than before.

The reply of the echo came back distinctly this time:

"Win-ne-so-o-o-o-ok."

"There," she shrieked, "I told ye. He hears me; he hears me! His voice comes faint, for the rocks presses on his heart; but when I call agin an' agin to him, he braces up an' answers me louder. Oh, I love him, I love him, an' I'm goin' to go to him an' free him some day. Just see ef I don't."

She broke out into her song again, raising her arms above her head and swaying her body like an almee. The thin little voice, sweet but trivial, pulsed with exultation like the warble of a bird. The unmeaning little tune, half drowned in the rush of the wind and the dull roar of the creek far below, seemed like a thread raveled from the fabric of some more attenuated existence and caught in the loom which weaves the coarse, material universe.

Stephen sat down on an old log and watched the girl while she swayed and sang. Her eyes glowed like dull coals. The fitful light from the moon, now darkened, now brightened as the clouds flew by, made her figure alternately fade and stand out in strong visibility. The flickering shadows from a thin tree passed to and fro over her dress like unearthly hands grasping her. Stephen kept wondering whether the scene was not more or less worked up for his benefit.

Presently, the girl broke off her song with a sudden high note. She burst into a loud fit of laughter. With a skip she reached Stephen's side. She sat down on the log beside him and placing her hands on his shoulders from behind, she rocked him to and fro with herself as she laughed and laughed and laughed. When she was tired laughing, she still sat close to him, her shoulder touching his so that she almost leaned on him.

"I suppose you think I'm crazy," said she.

"Do you often do this?" asked Stephen.

"Most every night."

"Almost every night?"

"Yes, even when it storms. I can't keep away."

"How long have you been doing it?"

"I dunno. Five years mebbe."

"Five years! Good heavens, Ruth, what a foolish thing. Does your father know you do it?"

"Guess not. Ef he did he'd give me the cowhide right smart. But he don't know nothin'. He's down to the rum shop every night an' when he comes home he thinks I'm in bed. He ain't mostly in a way to know ef I be or not. He ain't of much account, pop ain't."

"But the neighbors? Don't they wonder at you doing such a crazy thing?"

"It ain't a crazy thing."

"Well they'd think it was."

"Who cares about them? Anyhow I don't believe as one of them has the least knowledge of it."

They're mostly to bed when I come out. Ef I see anyone a-stragglin' out late, I hide till they pass. You kin hear 'em walkin' a long ways off. Anyhow, I've allus kep' out o' their way."

"But why do you do it?"

"Why? Because I love him. He's me beau an' I want to sit up with him. He can't come to me, so I come to him. Why shouldn't I — an' him in pain too? I wisht I could free him. I wonder how I could. They say down there that ef a woman'll give herself to him body an' soul, he'll be loosed from the Clove an' kin hunt through the mount'ns agin. Wouldn't that be grand? Just think of him so proud an' fine marchin' over the tops o' the hills and glidin' in an' out among the trees after the game. Oh, I wisht I could do it."

She leaned her elbows on her knees and her chin on her hands and sat in sullen unhappiness, gazing out over the gorge.

Stephen sat by her, silent in amazement and expectancy.

Presently the voice of the waters below underwent one of those unaccountable changes, which are among the surprises of the woodland. It grew fuller and louder. It sounded not unlike the moaning and gurgling of a choking man.

"Hear him," said the girl starting up in suppressed excitement and leaning out over the brink; "he's strugglin' to rise up. Oh, ef I could! Ef I only knew how!"

Then she put her hand to her lips again, and the wild cry cut through the air across the chasm:

"Winne-so-o-o-o-k! I am here."

The echo answered once again, and the voice of the creek fell back suddenly into its old rushing murmur.

She turned sharply to Stephen whose inclination to cynicism had given way to a creeping of the flesh.

"Tell me how!" she shot out eagerly.

He looked up at her, and the moon coming out showed her the astonishment in his face.

Her voice changed to a coaxing tone.

"Tell me how, Stephen," said she. "Tell me how to free him. I must give myself body an' soul; but how 'm I to do it? Ef I drown myself in the Creek, they'll fish out my body 'n bury it down in the churchyard where he dassent come for me, an' ef I jump over the edge, it'll be the same thing. He can't get my body, an' he must have me, body 'n soul. I ain't afraid, Stephen, I'll jump this minute ef you say you think it's the right thing."

"Oh, no," said Stephen, feeling instinctively, the surest way. "It would be no use at all to jump or to drown yourself. Your sweetheart would never get you. They'd take you away from him dead and leave him for some other woman to save, maybe in a hundred years or so. You've just got to live on and trust to luck. Maybe something will happen. If you're the fated woman, why fate will work it out for you in its own way. Anyway, you're excited

now. Come here and sit down. Or rather, let us go home. It's late."

He stood up. She came towards him. He caught at her and put his arm around her waist. As they started, she swung free and exclaimed in a hoarse whisper:

"Hear him cry!"

Some wild animal had uttered a howl somewhere deep in the woods. Again she ran to the brink and screamed out:

"Winneso-o-o-o-o-k."

Stephen jumped after her.

"You little fool!"

She struggled, but he clasped her tight about the body and drew her away. They started down the road. She relaxed and laid her head on his shoulder, sobbing.

"Oh, Stephen, I wisht you could tell how," she cried.

They kept walking on slowly. Suddenly, she straightened up, and without displacing his arm, withdrew herself from close contact with his body. She stepped out briskly. In a moment, she gave a short laugh.

"Ain't I a blamed fool?" said she.

"You certainly are," said Stephen, cool as a cucumber. "Where did you learn that dance?"

"At the circus over to Halestown," said she. "It was in what they called the Midway."

The Midway is the one universal inheritance of the American people from the Chicago exposition.

"An Indeen woman danced it in a tent; I guess that's why I liked it, because it was Indeen."

"Why, Ruth, it was not the sort of Indian you mean. I guess it wasn't Indian at all; but if it was, it was the India in Asia that was meant."

"Oh, was it? It don't matter. I think it's grand—so graceful like. Just as if it was in a picture. She was dressed grand too, with gold dollars all around her forehead and a chain o' gold about her middle."

"But how the deuce did a girl like you come to see such a thing at all? Didn't you know it was wrong?"

"Mebbe the other women did, but I didn't when I went in. I jest went in with the crowd. Lots o' the boarders, the fine ladies from New York, went in too. 'Course, after a while I see it was kind o' funny, but it wouldn't 'a been no harm ef the men'd ha' kep still. But they began shoutin' an' laughin' when she began squirmen' like, an' I thought I'd ha' died o' shame. I reckon she was a bad one. But men is beasts anyhow."

She shook herself free of Stephen's arm and crossed to the other side of the road. He laughed gaily at the implication.

They walked on in silence a while. Then she crossed back to Stephen's side, and, with her shoulder closely pressing against his, she asked:

"Do you know any women like that?"

"Like what?" he replied, replacing his arm about her.

"Actor women."

"Why?"

"I'd like to be one."

"A bad one like that?"

"Mebbe; mebbe not. I'd like to dance fine an' sing an' wear gold an' jewels an' make fools o' the men."

"The simple rustic maiden!" said Stephen grimly.

"Well, what's the use o' rottin' here all your life?"

"Why don't you get married?"

"Who's to marry, here?"

"There are plenty of good lads no doubt would be glad to have you if you gave them a chance."

"There ain't a man in the village I'd marry for a farm except one-armed Lefferts, an' he can't earn keep for a wife. Besides, I reckon he's only got sort o' half brains, though he's more'n all the rest o' Winnesook together. I know he's crazy for me, but he dassent say a word. He knows I'd slap his face. The idea of a one-armed cripple a-thinkin' o' me!"

"But evidently you think of him."

"Mebbe I would ef he had two hands an' could support me; but I won't work for no man."

"Well, well, someone else will turn up."

"No, I want to be an actress. Kin you help me to that?"

"No, I can't and I wouldn't if I could, you confounded little fool."

"Oh, you ain't no good for nothin' to-night. You're as useless as the boys up here," said she, putting her left arm about him caressingly and resting the hand on his shoulder.

They were in front of his gateway. She looked in his face with a smile. He drew her to him and kissed her. She returned the kiss. He let her go, and she hurried on towards her home.

Stephen turned into the path to his home. Before he reached the door, she was out of his head and he was reviewing the incidents of his visit at the Seamans' and Virginia was vividly before his mind's eye.

Ruth, as she climbed in at her bedroom window and went to bed, speculated as to whether she could induce Stephen to start her in the career of an actress in New York.

Then she wondered whether if she got the opening she could bear to go, to leave the mountains, to live in the city, to abandon her Indian sweetheart to his lonely agony in the bottom of the Black Cross Clove.

"No," she said to herself, "I kin never do it. I must be his, body an' soul."

Then she thought again: "Mebbe I could come back, when I was tired o' riches."

CHAPTER VIII

RELATING DISCOVERIES OF THINGS THAT THE PATIENT READER KNOWS ALREADY

As June came to an end, so did the work on Stephen's house. The scheme of reconstruction had gone beyond his original ideas. Except the shell, the house was a new one.

The bare old living room was bewitched into an ivory cabinet. Walls and ceilings were laid out in panels two feet square and they and their mouldings as well as the doors, mantel and window frames glistened with white enamel. On one of his trips to New York, Stephen had raided Chinatown and a dragon, a stork, a serpent or a butterfly in bronze studded the centre of each panel. The fireplace was turned into a shrine in which a smug Buddha sat smiling with fatuous optimism. The floor was a riot of rugs and the enamelled wicker sofas and seats were heaped with kaleidoscopic cushions.

On the other side of the hall, where two rooms had been knocked into one, as big as the living room, the panels were of green burlap and in each hung a brilliant water color. The mouldings were of oak and the furniture matched it — simple in design and

just enough for use. There was no silver in the room but the sideboard and shelving showed a brilliant array of glass, useful and fanciful. Only a glance was needed to show that the master of the house loved and respected wine.

The bedrooms were all upstairs — four of them. They were simple and manly without a trace of asceticism.

Stephen himself had no pleasure in killing, but he had no prejudices on the subject of sport, or indeed on any other. Behind the house, out beyond the servants' shack, he had built a log cabin. There he established a couple of shot guns and a limited supply of fishing tackle for prospective guests with a taste for slaughter.

The pagoda was the place for painting and for playing and lounging and talking. The piano was always out there on fine days. The chairs and lounges were picked with an expert eye to ease. The long low table with X legs and queer conceits burned all over it would do for a work table, a card table, a reading table, a writing table or even an eating and drinking table. In the full mellow light of the southwestern side stood the easel with the inevitable camp chair and the stool for brushes and materials. Pictures and sketches leaned back to the wall, face to the wall, right side up, wrong side up, and sideways, within easy reach.

On the First of July, Mrs. Seaman, Virginia and all the boys and girls journeyed down the mountain

to see Stephen's house. Piloted by Charley Mayhew, who had, of course, been a frequent visitor, they trooped from their carry-all up the pagoda steps. Stephen helped the ladies alight and caressed his moustache between the second finger and thumb of his left hand while he received compliments on the fine effect which his premises made when viewed from abroad.

Old Hosea Eltringham's cabbage garden had been ploughed level and sodded with such turf as could be cut in that country. A Venetian mast towered on each side of the house and brilliant bannerets flew from them, splashing, like gawdy birds, the background of forest and field with living color. On a hillock, beyond the carriage drive was a hum-drum modern flagpole — the ugliest instrument of display that mankind has ever invented. Stephen, feeling that it was indispensable even though inartistic, took care to plant it where it did not compromise the general picture. A screen of tall dark trees obscured the rigid lines of the staff and made a setting for the flag.

The barn was painted a warm brown picked out with scarlet. The window frames of the old stone house were scarlet too. Indian mats hung between the pillars of the pagoda and, on what might be called the taffrail of enclosing hip high walls, plants with much spreading leafage and brilliant blossoms stood in pots.

While Stephen, Mrs. Seaman, Virginia and Char-

ley ascended the steps of the pagoda slowly, saying pleasant things to each other — Kate, also, playing grown-up though at a loss for timely things to say — the children trooped ahead, and as children will when they feel they are welcome, spread themselves all over the place in a moment. The easel had a special attraction because the picture on it was covered with a veil. The instinct of discovery takes an elementary form in childhood; it is as frank as it is irresistible. So obvious a mystery as a veiled picture was a challenge. It did not take Robert ten seconds to whip away the square of dark blue bombazine and disclose *The Princess of Sunshine*.

Then there was a chorus of shouts.

“Oh, it’s Genia!”

“Oh, Mamma, it’s Virginia!”

“Oh, Genia, it’s you!”

“Oh, look at Genia, Genia!”

Kate forgot she was growing up and ran to look.

Virginia ran even faster. She clasped her hands over her breast to hold down the beating of her heart. The picture appeared to her the most ravishing thing she had ever seen. Indeed she looked almost as beautiful in it as in the flesh. Stephen had sketched her with unconscious passion, and with prophetic touch he had painted into the face a force of womanhood which was still dormant in the girl’s character and waiting for love and trial in love to awaken it.

He had made no attempt to reproduce the Sunday

scene on the road. The Princess of Sunshine was painted in a background, or rather in an aureole, which consisted of her pink parasol, mellowed in its own shadow. This filled up practically the whole space of the picture. The girl's face was perhaps one-third of natural size, and its snow and roses gleamed out in full daylight, while the chestnut mass of her hair was luminous in the shade. The loveliness of her neck, ivory in color and grace, curved down to where the treasure of her young bosom suggested itself in the heartshaped gore of the bodice, then glided beneath its muslin shelter — like the wavy brook hurrying all day long from the gaze of the tall trees to the modest concealment of its grass fringed banks. As Virginia looked at this reading of herself in the inspiration of nascent love, she saw through the film that seemed to cloud her eyes things that her mind then failed to realize but that her memory garnered up for hope to live on.

The reception of his picture slightly dismayed Stephen. Charley Mayhew frowned when he saw it, then walked away to the front of the pagoda, where he fell into a brown study. Virginia, herself, was between laughter and tears as she stammered thanks. Mrs. Seaman's heart sank within her with her first glance at the picture. She was too clever a woman to miss a strong suspicion of its meaning. The by-play, too, was an open book to her. She saw the effect on Virginia and she fathomed the disquiet which Charley Mayhew could not explain to himself.

And then she looked at Stephen and tried to appraise his attitude. There, even her discernment was at fault. Behind his mask of good humor and good breeding, she could not even guess what forces were at work. There was the picture, painted with passionate admiration. But how deep, how true was the passion? How far would it go? Was there earnest purpose in it?

The children with their chatter saved the situation. Stephen rallied and Mrs. Seaman put a good face on it and thanked him cordially without a word of untimely deprecation of the loveliness with which he had endued her daughter. Charley came back too and challenged Stephen with gaiety that was only a trifle forced for leaving him out of the picture.

"Oh, you're in it all right," Stephen rejoined, "only the parasol hides you."

"I don't call that being in it, when nobody can see you," said the literal Kate, and as this called for a genuine laugh all 'round, everyone was at ease again. Stephen led the way into the house, and when his ivory room and his olive room had been sufficiently admired, the party returned to the pagoda where Haribe and Ikumura made a prompt appearance with tea and wine and sandwiches and cakes. The children ate and flitted about; the four elders discussed the village and its people, Kate, too, sitting in state with them and contributing an occasional monosyllable. Virginia was excited, almost hysterical and let herself out more freely than ever before in Stephen's

company. She had much knowledge of Winnesook and its people, and she sketched them with wit and discernment, not without a hint of pity for their thin and arid life. Then she spoke of the beauty of the country and her eye lit up.

"There is only one thing I haven't seen," she exclaimed, "and that's the Fairy Pools. They must be very near here. I must see them. I want to have everything that's beautiful in Winnesook in my mind, so I can shut my eyes and see it."

"They're just a chain of shallow rock pockets," said Stephen, "filled up by the overflow of springs, but they're covered with water lilies and they wind their way through a grove of young trees. The branches meet overhead and the water is always speckled with sunshine. They are part of the Eltringham place, you know; they're about a quarter of a mile back there among the trees."

"Oh, can't we see them?" Virginia asked excitedly, getting up from her seat. "Wouldn't you like to go, Mamma?"

"I am rather tired, Virginia," said her mother smiling—the proposal suited her—"but you can go with Charley and the children if you wish. Mr. Eltringham won't mind staying half an hour with me."—Stephen bowed—"I guess you can find your way."

"I can send Lefferts with you," said Stephen.

Leonidas Lefferts had recently been added to the establishment as outdoor factotum. Stephen called

him and the troop trailed away over the lawn towards the woods and the rocks in the rear of the house, Kate bringing up the rear somewhat reluctantly upon a peremptory motion of her mother's head.

Mrs. Seaman and Stephen walked to the side of the pagoda, and leaning over the parapet watched the straggling cortege, Lefferts in the van, talking to Charley and Virginia with a gravity which their occasional laughter punctuated; the children picking wild flowers; Kate in more than grown-up contempt of the whole expedition.

For some minutes, the watchers said nothing. Then, as Mayhew and Lefferts helped Virginia through the thicket at the skirt of the wood, Mrs. Seaman turned to Stephen with a smile.

"Charley's a lovely boy," said she. "I hope they'll grow fond of each other. I'd like to see them married."

Stephen frowned slightly. He stood half a minute gloomily silent. He looked around to make some chance answer and saw Mrs. Seaman was looking after the party as it vanished in the brush with an air of mild maternal rapture. She turned and met his eye and colored a little. The idea came into his head that he was being warned off, and it amused him. He smiled, drawing, as usual, the hairs of his moustache between the thumb and second finger of his left hand. By common consent, they walked back a step or two and sat down. Mrs. Seaman went on easily and pleasantly:

"Mr. Seaman laughs at my matchmaking, but I think he would be just as pleased himself."

"Is not Miss Seaman rather young?" asked Stephen hypocritically.

"I was only a year older when I was married. Nowadays, I hear people talk of letting girls have a good time before they marry — as if marriage put a stop to good times. I'm sure I don't see anything in the life of girls to-day that I'd take in exchange for the early years of my marriage. I'd rather see my daughter a happy wife in a home of her own than making golf records or doing settlement work."

"Marriage on the high plane is a very beautiful thing," said Stephen, "and it is true that the more youth there is in it, the more beautiful it seems. I have known some old couples who kept their marriage young, and it was very beautiful."

"I love to detect little couples, Mr. Eltringham, just newly married. It brings tears of happiness to my eyes when I see them turn to each other with that look of understanding that they think no one sees but themselves. I seem to live my honeymoon over again. Why shouldn't I wish my daughter to have her share of the sweetest thing in life?"

"There is no doubt that love is the ornamentation of life."

"Oh, more than mere ornament, Mr. Eltringham; it is the spirit of life."

"Only another way of putting it. The thing we call beauty only exists in right of the spirituality

which it typifies. An ugly thing may take on beauty from the spirit in it; men and women often do; a thing which seems merely utilitarian at first glance may be beautiful when regarded as representing power and thought. That is the reason why a railway bridge does not necessarily destroy the beauty of nature. When it is great enough it may even add to the picture."

"Well, that's an artist's way of looking at it, Mr. Eltringham, and no doubt you're right. It is quite true that the beauty of marriage is in the spirit or at least in the mating of spirits. That is why I would be so happy if I saw Virginia and Charley drifting together. They seem to be made for each other. Charley is such a handsome fellow."

"He certainly is," Stephen interjected.

"Yes, fine and manly looking, and I'm sure the beauty there is typical of the spirit. I believe Charley has a fine, manly nature. His wife will never have to shed a tear for anything he does intentionally."

"He is good-heartedness itself, and as straight as a string," said Stephen.

"He is a good boy too. I don't mean goody-goody, I know he has a wild streak in him, and I don't suppose he has never made a slip from grace. But youth is his worst fault, and he'll outgrow that," — this with a smile at the mild pleasantry.

Stephen only bowed this time. He had no idea of discussing his comrade's private life even to praise

him. Mrs. Seaman was now so full of the topic that she had to exhaust it. She went on:

"It would be an excellent match in other respects too. Charley is bright and ambitious, and he has plenty of friends, who are all looking for chances to help him. I don't doubt he'll be a successful lawyer."

"I'm certain of it," commented Stephen.

"Yes, and in the long run he'll come in for a good deal of money. His mother is pretty well off and he has only two sisters. Then, his aunt, Mrs. Hexamer, I believe, has made a will in his favor."

"I believe so," said Stephen. "Charley has a sort of Midas touch."

He was watching Mrs. Seaman with a half quizzical smile. He was weighing the situation in his mind. Was this one of those casual bursts of confidence into which almost everyone slides irrelevantly at one time or another? Or was it an attempt to fend him away from Virginia — a combination of warning with appeal to his friendship for Charley? Whatever it was, it excited his opposition.

He had detected no sign in Mayhew of love for Virginia Seaman or anyone else. As for Virginia being in love with Mayhew — as this notion came into his head, he sat suddenly bolt upright; his face darkened and his temples flushed brown; — but no, that was impossible, or at least it wasn't so. He knew it wasn't. How did he know? Well — how *did* he know? He didn't know how he knew, but he knew.

That was a thing a man couldn't be mistaken about.

But was he in love with her himself? He thought back over their few meetings. He felt the beam of her smile; he was dazzled as to his soul by that mist of light that seemed to come out of her eyes and float before him. By God, he believed he was in love with her. At any rate he was in earnest in trying to find out whether he was or not — and, if he was, he was not going to be swerved by motherly matchmaking.

All this swept through Stephen's brain in the minute that Mrs. Seaman was speaking. It left him good humored again but quite resolute, his resolution masked as usual under the cool pose, the smile that was so taking, the polished manner, the manipulation of the moustache between the thumb and second finger of the left hand.

Mrs. Seaman felt puzzled, almost baffled, as she looked at him.

Stephen was casting around in his mind for an excuse to turn the conversation, when she resumed speaking.

"But instead of all this talk which can't interest you much, Mr. Eltringham," said she, "I should be thanking you for your beautiful picture of my daughter. Beautiful as it is, I won't pretend to think it is too beautiful for her. She is my own girl and she seems to me the most beautiful thing on earth. But, Mr. Eltringham, it is no small thing to realize that someone else sees her in the same light, and an

artist too. It makes me feel that what I see in her is not all due to a mother's partiality."

Stephen was quite grave now. He looked rather beyond than at her, and his tone was that of a man talking to himself as he said:

"Why, truly, I have only got a small part of what I see into that sketch. One never can give full expression to what he sees — at least only a few of us can, and when anyone does, we call it genius. Besides" — and here he came back to the reality of the hour and the place — "the medium is inadequate. I would have needed life size and oils to paint the Princess of Sunshine as she is."

This was said with simplicity and the smile which accompanied the statement was wholly free from enigma.

"Why don't you paint more in oils, Mr. Eltringham?" asked the lady. "Mr. Seaman thinks it such a pity that you don't and that you don't work harder. He has been watching your pictures for two or three years. He knows a great deal more about these things than I do, and he has always believed in your gift. He has repeatedly said it was a pity that you did not develop it. We all hope you will find inspiration here and do something really great."

Stephen for a moment seemed slightly embarrassed. He began with a mild evasion.

"I hope to find good material here," said he; "it

was partly for that I decided to come up. Very likely I shall try to do something serious soon — before the summer is over or in the early fall.” — He spoke in a fragmentary fashion as if feeling his way. — “I have some plans — no, hardly plans — I rather mean purposes — or hardly purposes — let us call them half-formed ideas as to the near future. I think it possible something may happen soon which may bring about a change in me or at least in my work.”

He was trying to make up his mind how far he should take advantage of the opening which Virginia's mother had unconsciously given to make a counter demonstration by qualifying as a suitor from at least one point of view. He let himself drift on, coolly flicking the ash from his cigarette — Mrs. Seaman had begged him and Charley to smoke at the beginning of the visit — and looking her in the eye equally without flinching and without aggression.

“You see, Mrs. Seaman,” said he, “the circumstances of my life have not been exactly favorable to hard work. I am a painter on the Clive Newcome plan. My father left me a considerable if not a large fortune.

“My friends probably think I took up painting instead of law or stockbroking as an excuse for idleness. That is not true. One's friends are always wrong. I took up painting because I have an inclination or, I might say, a craving to paint. I couldn't help painting and I have no vocation for any of the

money making ways of men. It is true, however, that I don't paint energetically.

"That's what Mr. Seaman thinks is such a pity."

"Well, I suppose I don't do it because I have no need to sell my pictures. I try to sell them sometimes; but that is because the market is the only place where an artist, so long as he's alive, can find out whether he's good for anything. When I sell a picture, I know I'm not altogether a duffer. But as I don't in the least need the money, and as I am even fonder of my own way than I am of painting, I don't try to sell many. I don't get many ready to sell. I do neither the most nor the best that I might if I had to."

"In that you are unfair to yourself."

"I may say that my work — when I think of it — is less satisfactory to myself than it could possibly be to anybody else. Nobody else is as interested in it as I am somewhere in my heart, under the coat of laziness and foolishness, and I may do better yet. I have worked hard at times and I have gained, I think, a fair technique."

"Mr. Seaman says your method is beautiful."

Stephen laughed pleasantly.

"One's friends are always wrong. I am a fair workman; what I most lack is intensity, without which there can't be any very good art."

"If you feel the defect, you must be capable of overcoming it."

"Perhaps some day earnestness may descend upon

me and make me a real man and so a real artist. I don't know where the gift will come from, I'm sure. There's no hope of my losing my money. I'm too good a business man. Perhaps someone may inspire me. I may say, Mrs. Seaman, that whenever I marry, as I hope to do, some day, I shall be very much in earnest about it. It may give me the concentration of purpose that I have lacked so far."

Mrs. Seaman was at a loss for a reply. She saw clearly that Stephen had not indulged in this dissection of himself, his circumstances and his prospects without some purpose. He could have only one end in view; then the situation was much more serious than she had imagined. She sat looking rather blankly out over the lawn and down towards the village, and the questions chased themselves hurriedly through her head whether Stephen could in so short a time have formed any serious design of marrying her daughter, and, still more, whether he had made any impression on the girl. This caused her to smile. No, she said to herself, in the fatuous mother's way; Virginia was too young and she was not that sort of girl; she knew nothing of love or marriage yet and she hardly knew Stephen — had talked with him very little. No, that was impossible anyway. She smiled at the absurdity of the idea, and as she did so she turned to Stephen with her usual good humor to make some pleasant acknowledgment of his half confidences.

She caught him looking at her with the same cool

but engaging smile. As she turned, he jumped up and pulled forward the tea table.

"After that dry lecture on art," said he, "I'm sure you must want more tea. I know I do. Tea is quite the thing for an art talk, I believe. I will light the lamp."

He rang the little bell that stood on the tea table, and as Ikumura waddled in, handed him the teapot to be prepared for a fresh brew and examined the copper kettle to make sure that it contained water enough. He ran on talking lightly so as to make a return to the serious topic impossible.

"Ah, here they come back," he exclaimed at last, and he and Mrs. Seaman went to the head of the steps to meet the explorers, who all seemed to be in good humor.

"I'd love to be a fairy and live on a big lily leaf out in the middle of the pool," exclaimed Virginia.

"You'd probably find the malaria pretty bad in the fall," laughed Charley Mayhew.

"Besides you're too heavy; you'd sink the leaf," said Kate, "you know you're not a little girl any more."

"Too bad to spoil your poetry and deprive me of a tenant," said Stephen. "Never mind, Miss Seaman, I'll rent you a leaf any time, or even two, and give you a lease for ninety-nine dreams."

She had taken her hat off and was swinging it in her hand. She threw her head back so as to look directly into Stephen's face as he bent over from

the top of the steps. Her cheeks were rosy with the walk, her face was serious, her lips slightly parted. The mist of light seemed to exude from her eyes. Stephen gazed down at her with unspeakable admiration — just for a moment. He stepped forward and offered his hand to help her to ascend. She put her hand in his. He was delighted with its delicate beauty and soft, cool touch.

As he landed her in the pavilion, he began gaily talking tea again, to cover his emotion. Charley and the children were already telling Mrs. Seaman all about the Fairy Pools.

Kate had stood at the foot of the steps watching Stephen and Virginia as they met. That evening she went into her sister's room and found her gazing into the looking glass, not at the candle light image of herself but through it and beyond it. Virginia turned to speak but Kate cut her off abruptly with the remark:

"Virginia, do you know, I think Mr. Eltringham's in love with you."

"Why, Kate, how dare you say such a thing?"

"Oh, don't be foolish, Genia. I almost think you're in love with him too."

"Why, Kate, you must be crazy."

"No, I'm not. I was watching you two to-day and I saw the way he looked at you. That's love I'm sure. Yes, I saw you looking at him too and I

know you thought him handsome. Charley says he's rich. He hasn't proposed yet, has he? I know you'll accept him. I would. I just wish I was old enough for him to propose to me. I'd say yes in a hurry, you can bet."

"You saucy little fool, if you don't get out of my room this minute I'll box your ears," snapped Virginia, her cheeks blazing with shame and her eyes with anger. "If you ever say one word like that again, I'll tell mamma and then see how you'll like it! The idea of a child of your age talking to grown-up people in that way."

Virginia literally caught her by the shoulder and put her out of the room. Then she banged the door and threw herself on her face on the bed sobbing hysterically.

She saw it all, she said to herself. Mr. Eltringham had been making game of her; she had been too free in her attitude towards him; maybe she had been immodest. She would never see him again — or if she did she would be so cold and distant that horrid little fools like Kate couldn't misunderstand her and think ill of her. Then she cried a little more over the privation, for she admitted to herself that she liked Mr. Eltringham and enjoyed his society. And as she sat on and on, thinking it all over, Kate's suggestion came back that he was going to propose to her. Impossible! She would die of embarrassment. Then she wondered how he would do it, how he would look and what he would say, and

she began to invent ways of turning him aside, appeals to him to spare her and at last gentle but dignified forms of refusal, until in a couple of hours she quite accustomed herself to the idea. On that she went to bed and having exhausted her nervous force fell into a deep sleep which lasted long into the morning.

When she awoke, the prospect of Stephen's proposal was strangely familiar. What vast journeys our minds travel in sleep! Her thoughts now no longer dwelt on forms of refusal. It is true she did not admit to herself that the refusal would never be spoken, but she thrilled with unacknowledged delight as she imagined the smile, the tones, the manner, at once soothing and compelling, in which, her instinct told her, the proposal would be clothed. She buried her burning face in her hands as the imagined scene swept past her intoxicated senses.

Thus Virginia passed, with the aid of her shrewd young sister, from the unconscious to the conscious stage of being in love. For presently she no longer concealed it from herself that not her heart only but herself, every fibre in her being, had passed into the ownership of Stephen Eltringham. With the sweetest clairvoyance, she realized, too, that he loved her. She felt it in every remembered moment of their encounters. She had not a doubt now that he would indeed ask her to surrender her life to him.

She only wondered when the time would come. She hoped he would not speak too soon. She wanted

to enjoy this first phase of her happiness — Oh, a long time. Indeed she could form no clear picture of what was to follow. She had never in the innocence of her girlhood identified the idea of courtship or marriage with herself in any way.

The only shadow that crossed her mind was as to the attitude of her father and mother. Would they be angry? Would they think her forward, immodest? It never occurred to her that any disapproval could attach to Stephen as a suitor, but the mere matter of her falling in love at all — was that wrong or would they think it so? Coupled with this question was the other one, whether they already knew it? If Kate could find out so easily, why not they? And then came the question: How did Kate find out? What was there in her demeanor that was so easily read?

She begged off from breakfast on the plea of a headache and the living statue in polished bronze took coffee and toast and things to her room — and she consumed them with healthy appetite. Almost simultaneously came Kate, rather nervous over the reception she was likely to get, sent by their mother to find out how Virginia was. Virginia was amiability itself and Kate went away puzzled, to announce that there was “nothing the matter with Virginia except laziness.” After breakfast, Mrs. Seaman went to see for herself. She found Virginia nearly dressed and evidently quite well; but she noticed the alternating pallor and flush on her

daughter's face as she entered the room. She dimly grasped that there was something unusual in the air, but she had no clue to what it was and she was discreet enough not to ask questions.

Virginia spent the entire morning in the woods alone. At lunch she had regained control over herself — so much so that she only blushed slightly when Charley Mayhew began to talk about Stephen. Of course she was full of fears that her secret was known and that she was being observed and read by those about her. But, in fact, there were no suspicions except Kate's — and they were merely suspicions. Only, her mother, who covertly watched her all that day, detected in her words and looks and motions, an enhancement of warmth and grace.

CHAPTER IX

THE BLACK CROSS CLOVE

LEONIDAS LEFFERTS was not really a one-armed man. His left arm was withered. In his babyhood someone had wrenched it and its development was arrested. The arm remained like that of a child; it was of no use. The mutilation was the controlling factor in the formation of Lefferts's character. Cut out by nature to be a dreamer, his visions and speculations, had he been sound as other men, might have been bright and feasible; but, handicapped as he was, his mind took on a cast of expectancy and its products tended towards the impracticable.

As a boy he had not suffered as much as might be imagined from the malice of his playmates, for he was gifted with a physique of unusual vigor which developed early. His ability to thrash all the boys anywhere near him in age saved him much of the humiliation that would have fallen to the lot of a weakling. Having this favorable experience to start with, the awakening was all the more bitter when in his teens he discovered that the world was determined to relegate him to the cripple class.

His father had foreseen this and had resolved to educate him to be at least a schoolmaster, but the father died when the lad was fourteen and left him with nothing but the clothes he stood in and a crop of second and third cousins. Leonidas, while neither energetic nor assertive, had a slow, dull pride in him, which would not tolerate his being a burden to anyone. The prospect of scholarship being gone, his hopes turned to handicraft. He would have wished to be a carpenter and he begged Enos Fairweather to take him as an apprentice and then the blow fell.

A one-armed carpenter! The boy must be mad. He showed what he could do with his one hand. He pleaded, he argued. It was no use. An unaccustomed idea had as much chance of prevailing in Winnesook as lawn grass might have had of flourishing in one of its stone quarries.

Lefferts was not easily defeated. He went to Halestown; he tried the sawmill. At last he walked to Wiltwick and argued with every mechanic in the town. But the empty sleeve pinned to his blue shirt made refusal inevitable everywhere. If he had stayed in Wiltwick, someone might have found an open door to life for him. But he tramped back to Winnesook, went to the least acid cousin's house and for the next seven years became a drudge for a bare subsistence.

At twenty-one, when he broke away, he was by far the most powerful man in the village. Six feet tall and hugely broad, he could lift incredible weights

and work for incredible periods. He was the best ball pitcher in the place, the best shot and the only successful fisherman; fish were too scarce to tempt anybody who considered his time of value. By means of appliances which he had invented to supply his deficiency and in virtue of his colossal strength, he could guide a plough, a harrow or a reaping machine. He could drive a horse, tend stock and handle a pitchfork. In short, he could do, one way or another, eighty per cent of all the things that are done about a farm. He had, besides, such taste in gardening as the opportunities of the village availed to develop. Withal, he had read considerably — more of poor than rich material — and he had thought, or brooded or dreamed much, thereby diverging more and more, day after day and year after year, from the type of the Winnesook man.

Had he chosen, he might perhaps have earned as much as any of his neighbors. His strength compensated for his inability to do some few things. Employment of one sort or another was almost always open to him. But he had made up his mind after the Wiltwick visit that the world had no real place for him. He formed a theory touching himself of pre-ordained impotency. He never tried for anything because he never expected to gain any point that he aimed at. He worked only enough to keep alive and the rest of his time he spent dozing by the pools of the creek with his fishing rod, roaming through the mountains, or lying prone upon some

lofty rock, from which he could gaze over the sun steeped plains to the Hudson. He was hopeless without being resentful and reserved without being morose. His sad brown eyes looked from a round, sparsely bearded face, whose immobility was its most remarkable characteristic.

Stephen Eltringham only took a day or two to distinguish Lefferts from the village in general. It was his human sympathy and not his artistic sense which singled the man out, for Lefferts was not even picturesque in his singularity. But his artistic sense was only one of Stephen's means of contact with people and things, and the sad eye and sad story, not to speak of Ruth Freer's qualified endorsement, made him seek speech with the man. The engagement of Lefferts as outdoor factotum followed in the natural order of things.

After two or three all-day tramps together through the woods, Lefferts asked Stephen one morning — it was the week after the Seaman's visit of inspection — if he would not like to go up into the Black Cross Clove.

"They say that it's uncanny," said Lefferts, "and there ain't a one o' them as 'll go near it unless mebbe, when they're after stray cattle, and then they get skeered till it's laughable. But I've ben up there many's the time and I've spent hours an' days right in the depths of it, an' no hurt's ever come to me. 'Tain't to say as it's a bright or a cheerful sort o'

place. I'm bound to confess I feel as ef there's some sort o' fate about it. It seems as ef the shadow o' somethin' comin' falls acrost my path whenever I go in it."

"Something going to happen, a presentiment like?" suggested Stephen.

"Well, I dunno. I don't seem to feel as ef 't was me that was in danger. I can't exactly describe it to you, Mr. Eltringham, but when I get in there I seem to be listenin'; listenin' an' waitin' for somethin' to happen. Yes, sir, it puts such a feelin' on me that, for days after, I keep expectin' somethin'. I wake up in the night, Mr. Eltringham, an' seem to hear a rush, a thunder, I don't know what, 's ef the torrents was let loose and was comin' swoopin' down from the sky int' the Clove.

"An' then I don't know what it is; sometimes I think it's a screech an' sometimes I think it's a singin' like, as comes through it all. But you see it's gone 's quick as I awake an' try to catch the meanin' o' the sounds. Before I can raise on my elbow, it's all still again, or I only catch the rush o' the brook or the sweep o' the wind; sounds as I know. An' then the whole feelin' passes away in a day or two.

"I often swear I'll never go back to the place; but it's a kind o' passion like lookin' int' the future. It grows on me that ef I could just catch that screech or singin', or whatever it be, sure, sartin, I'd know what it all means. But I never kin git it right."

His face had gone pale, his eyes looked beyond Stephen. He spoke slowly. He almost seemed to be in a mild cataleptic trance.

"What does it sound like?" asked Stephen.

"I can't tell. Sometimes it's like a screech o' death, and sometimes I a'most think it's like that crazy song that Ruthy Freer is always singin'."

"By God, you don't say so!" exclaimed Stephen. He could feel the gooseflesh creep over his body at the weird suggestion, and his emphasis startled Lef-ferts in turn.

"Mebbe," said the latter, "it's her crazy talk that puts it in my head; an' then, as I say, I'm noways sure I hear it. I only sometimes seem to think it."

"Let us go up and see the damned place," said Stephen.

The way up through the heart of Winnesook Notch is at once a dream and an adventure. The beauty of the waters and of the woods that cover the southern side of the glen, with the forbidding rock wall of the northern side to throw their freshness into relief, delights the invader. As you tread the grassy border under the rocks, the stream coming down to meet you purls invitations among the stones in its bed. The easy slope of the southern side with its fringe of ferns, its carpet of moss, its pillar maze of tree trunks and its vault of matted branches, woos like a land of love and loitering.

And when the heart comes welling up in one's throat with the joy of the woodland, an angle in the

rockwall is turned, and, from far above, the water in forms of snow white girls at play comes dancing through endless hours on the elastic air, and through endless hours finds peace in the sleepy crystal of the bed that it has hollowed for itself through centuries in the lap of the precipice.

Up past the first cascade went Stephen Eltringham and his guide, crossing the stream and making their way over the wooded southern slope. Half a mile further on they scrambled around a second waterfall and then a third. They were within sight of still another when Lefferts stopped and pointed upward. Stephen saw that just above them the rock was cleft to within a hundred feet or so of the bed of the creek. The huge gap 250 feet wide was filled with a tangle of green. Stephen recognized it as the northern arm of the cross about which the road wound far above. It was manifestly inaccessible. The face of the rock afforded no foothold.

"I guess no livin' critter 'cept mebbe a bird or a squurrl's ever ben in that hollow," remarked Lefferts. "You can't climb up from here an' you can't climb down from the road."

Stephen gazed long and wonderingly at that queer nook, which from where he stood seemed to be midway between heaven and earth, and which for perhaps 10,000 years, had defied invasion. He knew the Winnesook legend, but he was modern enough to be swayed by the poetry in the scientific truth of the place rather than by the poetic fable.

"Well," said he at last, "as we can't go up there, Lefferts — and I'm not sure there'd be anything worth going for— where are we going?"

"Up into the other arm, Mr. Eltringham, ef you ain't afraid of a chill," said Lefferts.

"The other arm," said Stephen, "I don't see a sign of it."

"It's here all the same," said Lefferts.

Stephen turned his back to the rock mass. The opposite side of the creek was lined with a grove of young trees. On either side, he could see the mountain slope inward at a gentle grade. It seemed as if open ground facing them divided two hills.

Into the young wood Lefferts plunged, Stephen after him. The brush was thickly matted and for five minutes they struggled through it. Then the ground rose sharply before them clear and mossy with tall trees standing far apart. Five minutes more of scramble up the slope followed. Stephen wondered if a rainstorm were gathering, the air darkened so suddenly. Then he found himself close under a rock that leaned forward over his head. He could not see the top of it.

Lefferts skirted along the base a hundred yards and turned sharply to the left. Stephen followed. For a moment, he thought they had entered a cave. The silence was intense. He looked up. Far above, farther than it had ever before seemed to him, was a streak of sky. Trees clinging to the upper crags

or stretched out over the brink were thrown in inky tracery against the blue strip. Over the blackened walls of the chasm trickled a sweat which was lost amid the slimy boulders heaped up in the bed of the ravine, and covered with damp, mouldy weeds and sickly fungus.

"Don't they look like a heap o' drowned corpses at the bottom o' the sea, with the seaweed a' growin' over them?" asked Lefferts indicating the grotesque contours of the stones.

"Horribly," said Stephen, and he was going to say more; but his voice had a cracked sound in the close, still atmosphere.

Lefferts advanced carefully over the slimy surfaces. Stephen's less accustomed feet slipped and stumbled. The atmosphere was dank and chill and he shivered. Lefferts, turning to see how he was getting on, noticed it.

"It's always cold down here," said he. "Ef you searched under them rocks, you'd find chunks o' ice that never melts all the year 'round. Mebbe some of it's thar sence the first winter the clove was split open."

They picked their way carefully over the treacherous stones for 300 feet or so. Then the slimy heaps loomed up so abruptly that further advance over them was impossible. The rock wall on the east side, however, fell back suddenly five or six feet, leaving a broad ledge upon which coarse grass and a

few saplings had taken hold. Lefferts scrambled to the top of a big boulder and stepped from it to the ledge. Stephen followed him.

It led deeper into the clove, rising from shelf to shelf as they advanced. They were soon twenty feet above the level of the boulder heaps, which in the gloom below might have been taken for a mountain torrent, stopped in its flow by some freak of nature, its eddies and billows congealed into emerald rigidity.

Lefferts kept on steadily. The path sometimes narrowed so that they had to lean against the rock to keep from falling to the bed of boulders. Then it would widen out again to four or five feet and they would have to force their way through the underbrush. At last, the rock wall, high and black seemed to shut in the clove at its upper end, barring their further progress. When they reached what seemed to be the very end, they started as if to cross the clove still on the shelf of rock. But Stephen realized in a moment that it was not really the end. It was only a rock promontory which narrowed the ravine down to a mere chink, as it seemed in comparison with the vast heights of the cliffs at either side and the width and depth of the great gully which they had ascended.

Stephen turned and gazed back over the way they had come. He could see, far away but almost on a level with the place where he stood, the road winding around the northern arm of the cross. He

watched a teamster's wagon, looking like a toy, crawl by the corner where he had been, a few nights before, with Ruth Freer. He tried to picture to himself how his present location looked by daylight from the road. He recalled a dark crease or furrow at the bottom of a funnel of forest, and he remembered a treeless expanse somewhere just above it, where the mountain slope rose bare and steep. He asked Lefferts where the bare patch was situated.

"Inside," said he. "In the pit o' Tophet."

"The pit of Tophet?"

"Yes, sir, it seems like the place o' lost souls."

"You have a cheerful imagination, Lefferts."

"Mebbe you'd like to see it."

Stephen nodded.

"It ain't hard," Lefferts went on, going out to the point of the promontory, "ef you ain't scart of a little leap."

"If you can do it, I suppose I can."

Lefferts sprang across the narrow space to the other wall of the gully. The distance was less than four feet; it only seemed risky on account of the tremendous surroundings; the drop was twenty feet to the moss covered boulders. Stephen followed easily.

The shelf they now stood on sloped disagreeably and it was slippery. The rock was a friable, shaly formation, the kind that rots away in paraboloid curves. Stephen didn't half like it, but Lefferts stepped along briskly.

They were in a sort of corridor between the rock

walls, with, it seemed, open space beyond. The shelf they were on ran in a series of shallow bays; it varied in width and pitch, but afforded continuous footing. It was not very safe; but it was practicable. The distance was only sixty or seventy feet. As they reached the further end, Stephen saw before him a great open chamber three hundred feet across. The walls towered fifty feet above them; to the east a black, hard, igneous rock, on the other sides the friable, chocolate-hued shale. Above these walls, the mountain rose at an abrupt angle, wooded save just opposite, where the bare patch showed dirty yellow with a few weeds and shoots dotted over it.

All the way around the chamber the same ledge on which they stood could be traced. In the middle of the opposite side, it projected three or four feet, like the base of an oriel window. Above this projection, at the top of the rock, was a corresponding one like a canopy. They worked their way all around the two sides and a half of the chamber to this projection, and from there surveyed the strange and dreadful place. Stephen noticed that the mountain slope above the rock wall rose to the sky on three sides like a funnel. Opposite to where they now stood, however — on the clove side — there was only a fringe of trees along the crest of the rock. On the three mountain sides, there was no doubt a thousand feet of slope.

Stephen looked at the floor of the chasm, not more than twenty feet below. It was a chaos of rock

debris, loose soil and rotting timber. In one corner was a fine tree, its leaves still green but withering. It had evidently fallen within a day or two from the mountain side above.

Stephen mentally wished he had been there to see the fall. It must have been a wild moment as the great trunk came down, bringing with it tons of earth and gravel.

"I call this Satan's pulpit," said Lefferts. "I think as I can see him standin' here in the middle of a storm ex'ortin' his imps as crowds the space around us to spread sin an' ruin over the earth."

"You don't go much on the old Indian story, Lefferts," said Stephen.

"No, sir," he replied. "Of course, what I'm sayin' is nonsense; but that Indeen story's worse nonsense still. You see, sir, it's impossible for the spirit to pin himself down with his tommyhawk. It don't stand to reason, sir. Besides, ef he was pinned down here, where is he?"

"Where's you're devil?"

"Why, he's everywhere, ain't he?"

"Oh, he's everywhere, is he? How do you know?"

"Why, sir, don't we see his works in all the bad as is in the world?"

"You don't think God has anything to do with the things we call bad, then?"

"How could he, sir; ain't he all good?"

"How do you know they're not really good, too?"

"The bad good, sir?"

"Yes; maybe it's just a matter of light and shade."

"That's too deep for me, Mr. Eltringham; but I'll think it over, sir. Anyhow, I never took much stock in that old Indeen nonsense. You see, sir, how could a woman o' flesh'n blood ever marry him as the story puts it. 'N' where'd they go then? It's just the foolish talk o' them old times. Ruthy Freer's the only one now-a-days as pays enny heed to it. An' I've never ben able to make out how much she really believes an' how much is jest put on t' seem different from other folks. She's a queer girl an' I can't make her out."

"Well, it'll be a stupid time for men when the girls cease to be a puzzle."

"Anyhow, sir, I'm pretty sartin sir, as you're now standin' in a spot as nubbody livin's ever stood in exceptin' yourself an' herself an' me."

"Herself! You don't mean to say that Ruth Freer's ever been here?"

"Many an' many a time. This very rock's a favorite perch o' hers. She sits up here by the hour o' Sundays a-swingin' her feet over the edge an' singin' that crazy song o' hers or else wrigglin' her body, immodest like."

"Did you show her the way here, Lefferts?"

"No, sir, never. I wouldn't do it. I don't think no gal has a right to be a-kitin' 'round the mountain like that. Thar's no tellin' what mought happen to her."

"Then how did she ever find the way?"

"I dunno. I guess it jest come natural to her."

As they spoke, they heard a smashing noise a few feet away, and something struck Stephen's arm.

"Jest see the danger of it," said Lefferts.

Stephen was going to ask what it was when, looking up, his eye caught a stone as it detached itself from the edge of the rock wall and fell crashing to the floor of the chasm, followed by a shower of sandy earth. The stone broke into a hundred fragments, one or two of which rebounded and peppered Stephen and Lefferts sharply.

"Pretty risky spot," commented Stephen.

"Yes," said Lefferts, "on days like this soon after rain, they fall pretty thick. Ef one o' them caught you on the head it would be all day with you."

"Is it always like that?" Stephen asked.

"Only in the last year or two," Lefferts replied.

"I remember the time when nothin' much fell, an' the bottom o' that pit was 'way down lower, all dead men's corpses like the clove outside. It began to fall when the line o' rock along the edge up thar gev way. There useter be a kind o' eaves up thar that the mount'n rested on like, but the rock under it rotted an' since then it seems as ef the hull mount'n was goin' to drop into the Pit o' Tophet gradual, an' mebbe fill it up."

"That would be a queer materialistic end for the old ghost story."

"Well, there's a big change sence it begun to fall,

though most o' the sand an' earth washes out with the rains, an' the spring freshets carries away lots o' the stones even. But it's filled up some.

"Onct in a while there's a big fall. That bare patch was about two year ago jest where the ledge broke off. A slice slid off'n the mount'n side like. You should 'a seed the place after. It was filled up pretty near level with where we stand with the trees all in a tangle."

Stephen's desire to linger was considerably reduced by the obvious peril. He led the way around the rocky shelf and through the ravine to the open air and down to the sunlight of the Winnesook notch. All the way home, the puzzle of Ruth Freer was uppermost in his mind. Was she simply perverse and wilful? Or was she more or less insane? Or was she a genius run to seed? He questioned Lefferts about her, but found out nothing except that the man plainly thought her uncanny, yet worshipped her with a sort of dumb hopelessness.

CHAPTER X

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM OFFICIATES AS JOURNEYMAN TO FATE

WHEN Stephen reached home after his morning with Lefferts in the Black Cross Clove, he found something else to think of besides the eccentricities of Ruth Freer. He called at the post office for his letters and he got this:

Dear Stephen:

I want to see your new house, and, I don't care, I want to see you too. Some of the push have buncoed a hayseed in Halestown into letting them have rooms and they think they'll spend July and August getting rested up.

None of that for me. I expect I'll have to rest a long time when I'm dead, so I'll keep busy while I have standing room on the earth. But I guess I can live through a few days of it and as I hear the place is near you I'm going up with the girls.

The whole crowd of us will drive over some afternoon to give you a jar, so if any of your sassiety lady friends are around and you think it would hurt my morals to meet them, you'd better send me a line to the Swift House, Halestown, and I won't blow in until they've flitted. I wouldn't want to embarrass you by having to apologize to me for knowing them. I'm not a bad fellow, am I Stephen?

I won't send you love for I don't believe you really care a damn for me—Oh, shocking! Horrid girl! But I know I'll be as foolish as ever when I see you, and I'll kiss you right

under the spot where you're trying to pull your moustache out. You see if I don't.

Your old, old

TRIX.

P. S. We open in Halestown Tuesday night.

Stephen was not particularly pleased, but he took the situation good humoredly. This was Wednesday, so, after luncheon, he drove in his village cart to Halestown.

Trixie Joliette was thirty years old, but with a dotted veil on she didn't look more than twenty-four and sometimes by gas light she might have passed for twenty. Her real name was Sarah Magee. She was the daughter of a working carpenter in a small town in Indiana, a high school graduate, and the grass widow of a wealthy manufacturer's son, who had been starved by his father into deserting her. The father had then paid her handsomely to get a Dakota divorce.

She drifted to New York with a good deal of money to her credit, took a place in the chorus of a "leg show"—she had been a leading choir singer in her native town and all of her voice that hadn't been cultivated was good—and finally graduated into solo parts in road companies. Her speciality on and off the stage was animal spirits. She was a "good fellow." She had a good deal of stearine beauty; her figure was still superb. She had a large following of men about town, she lived in good hotels, dressed like the wife of a sudden millionaire and had \$15,000

worth of diamonds, of which Stephen Eltringham had contributed his share.

Stephen's appearance at the Swift House was hailed with delight by Trixie and her party. There were six of them altogether. Stephen dined with them and gave them far more champagne than was right. After dinner, he walked with Trixie through the country roads and sat with her on the verandah before he went home. The next day he drove over in the village cart again. He sent half a dozen telegrams from Halestown, picked up Trixie at the hotel and drove five miles further north to Elf Hollow, where they lunched and he had a long confab with the proprietor of the hotel, a place much favored as a resort for pleasure parties.

"When are you going to show me your bungalow?" asked Trixie as they strolled about Halestown in the dusk after dinner. She gave his arm a little shake as she asked the question.

He puffed his cigarette three times, using up the most fragrant half inch of it, then threw it away.

"Well," said he, "as you're going back to the city on Monday, you'd better come over to-morrow."

She bit her lip. She hadn't had the least notion of going back to the city on Monday. She had hoped to make a good long stay, perhaps to move over to Winnesook. However, she knew Stephen well enough to know that she was going on Monday since he said so. She swallowed her vexation and meekly replied:

"All right, Stephen. What time?"

"Get a trap about eleven and you can drive over in time for early lunch. Then we'll have a nice long talk and I'll drive back with you for dinner here. My mare will be pretty tired after to-day, so get a two-seated wagon and a team and we'll have it wait for us."

"All right, Stephen," she said submissively, but there was a gulp in her voice. It was far from what she had expected.

Stephen had intended to suggest off hand, by way of a happy thought, that she bring one or two of the other girls with her, but he took pity and didn't. On the contrary, he came out of his ice jacket a good deal as he resumed:

"I've got a little treat for you Saturday evening."

She looked up hopefully.

"I've made a deal with that fellow where we lunched to-day to get up a barn dance for us — just our own party. I've wired to Charley Mayhew and Tommy Slawson and Richfield and three or four more to come up, and we'll have a straw ride from here, and back again about dawn and we'll have an *H* of a time."

"Stephen," she asked, stopping and speaking sharply, "who is she? Are you going to throw me down for some wild goose that you've caught up here?"

"Not at all," said Stephen. "Don't get excited."

"Not that I care if you are," she went on with a flare-up. "I'm not such a fool as to think we'll always be — well, what we are now; I don't know what you choose to call it. But, when the time comes, I want you to tell me right up and down. You'll find I'll be square just as I've always been. I'm a good fellow, I am. But don't play a double game with me, Stephen. I'm no fool; I see there's something wrong this trip. Just tell me honestly what it is."

Stephen stood gloomily looking at the ground. He had been trying to conceal from her, even from himself for these few days, that things were different. But how could he? With the new future dawning, things had to be so very different that concealment was childish. Still nothing was ripe for a break and at that moment one would be too cruel. So he looked up and said as simply and as frankly as he could:

"When the time comes, I'll be perfectly square with you, Trixie. But you're dealing in futures tonight. Don't let us spoil the evening. I've nothing to be frank about yet, anyhow."

"All right, Stephen," said she, once again with a little gulp. "I'll take your word for it."

The programme was carried out the next day as Stephen suggested. The strange vehicle rattling up

the stony road brought all Winnesook to its doors, and the picturesque passenger with her white costume and big red veil with long tails streaming behind simply wrecked the industries of the village for the day. Man and woman competed in endeavor to manufacture a scandal out of the incident.

As a matter of fact, Stephen showed his "friend" about the house and the grounds, even as far as the Fairy Pools. He had luncheon served in the pavilion and he and she sat there all the afternoon chatting like old friends. He showed her his sketches and got her views on them — all except one. He had put the Princess of Sunshine out of reach, not because he was afraid to have Trixie Joliette see it, but because his gorge rose at the idea of its being seen by her.

Stephen sent the Halestown driver with his horses down to Garrett's for rest and refreshment. He had arranged in the morning with Garrett; therefore the coming of the woman with the red veil had been expected; the man's arrival at the Winnesook House was watched from forty doorsteps, and in the course of the afternoon half the village found excuses for visiting Garrett's stable and kitchen. Ruth Freer waited until she saw the man, whom she knew slightly, return from the stable to the house. Then she walked up the village and into the kitchen where the driver was sitting down to dinner with Garrett and his wife. She was just in time to hear Annie Garrett say:

"Then she ain't goin' to make no stay up to the house yonder?"

"No," said the man, "as it's gev to me, him an' her's goin' to drive over with me in time fer supper. I heerd her givin' some orders before we set out. She said he — Mr. Elterman, I think, she calls him — was a-comin' back with her."

"Who is she?" asked Ruth bluntly.

"She's an actor-woman, they say," said the man. "There's a whole flock of 'em over to the Swift. They's drinkin' an' dancin' an' carryin' on 'most all night. This one seems to be his nibs's steady — up to the house yonder. Leastways they allus pair off together when he's over to Halestown. He do fling money around on her somethin' terrible."

"'S she goin' to be over to Halestown all summer?" asked Ruth.

"No, I b'lieve not. I hear tell she's goin' down to New York o' Monday."

"What name does she go by?" Mrs. Garrett put in, saving Ruth a hard question.

"Why, I don't rightly know her name," said the man. "I hear them all a-callin' her Miss Jolly, but that ain't a name, an' I guess it's some of their tomfoolery, because she's always a laughin' an' rompin' an' gigglin' like. Anyhow, she answers to it all right, for I called her Miss Jolly while we was drivin' over. She looked at me an' laughed to split her sides, but she didn't make no corrections."

This was all Ruth wanted to know. She walked over to Halestown the next morning. She went to the Swift House and asked for "Miss Jolly." Trixie was having coffee in bed and sent down to ask what was wanted. She sent back word that she had a message from Stephen Eltringham. Trixie guessed that this was a lie, but it set her curiosity on edge, so she sent her maid away and had Ruth shown up to her room, receiving her, sitting up in bed with a pink and lace dressing jacket all ruffles and ribbons, hanging loosely from her shoulders.

The garment fascinated Ruth; it was a revelation of actress life in the city. It awoke her unhealthy fancy. She stood a full minute gazing at the foolish thing and its wearer — together very pretty indeed, and well worth gazing at. The New York fever burned strong in her.

Trixie was always good-humored and admiration, however crude, was not likely to sour her. So it was with a very kindly smile and gentle tone that she asked:

"Well, dear, what do you want?"

"I want to go to New York," said Ruth, half sulkily.

"Want to go to New York? Well, why don't you? But what do you want to go for?"

"I want to be an actress like you are an' see the world. There's no life here an' I want to live."

"God help you, you poor little fool. Sit down here."

She made the girl sit on the edge of the bed, and held her hand. She took her in from head to foot, appraising her attractions with expert judgment. Her mind created within itself in a second a comprehensive view covering the disillusionment, the danger, the hopeless shipwreck that most likely awaited this pretty, primitive, ignorant, unmoral creature bobbing around in the larger life. Trixie sometimes felt tears in her heart, though no one ever saw them in her eyes.

"Why do you call me a fool?" Ruth asked querulously, "and I don't see that I'm so little, neither."

"Don't get mad," said Trixie. "I call you a fool for wanting to go to New York, and for wanting to see life, as you say"—Ruth hadn't said it—"and wanting to be an actress."

"Why am I a fool for wanting to be an actress? Ain't you one?"

"Well, some of the newspapers say I'm not; but, even if I am, that's different. I'm used to it and I can't help it."

"Well, no more can I. I'd sooner be dead than live here."

"But what do you want me to do about it? What brings you to me?"

"I heard of you from Stephen Eltringham and I thought you'd take me with you."

The very masculine allusion to a warm climate with which Trixie Joliette received this refreshing falsehood need not be put in print. She added:

"Stephen's no blabber, whatever he is. I don't believe you."

"Why don't you?" said Ruth. "Why, he told me you was goin' down the river a Monday."

"Has he been making a fool of you, too?"

"Nobody makes a fool o' me. I ain't no fool, I tell you, though all you smarties from the city want to call me one to my face. I had to make him quit, too."

"What is he to you, anyhow?"

"He ain't nothin' to me an' I don't mean as he ever will be. That's partly why I want to get away from here."

"Well, what have I to do with it? Why do you come to me?"

"Oh, I dunno. I thought as you'd just as soon take me with you. Mebbe I was wrong. You see I'll work for you till I can git hired in a theaytre. Ef you'll teach me to do actin' I won't ask no pay from you. I'm strong an' neat an' quick. I can sew an' cook some an' wait at table. I've ben in hotels here, summers, so I know more'n you'd think for. Please don't say no. I'm jest dyin' t' go, dyin' to git out o' here. I'll work me fingers t' the bone for you. I'll give you half my earnin's when I git on the stage — for a whole year. I've simply got to git out o' here, an' ef you don't take me, I'll run away an' walk."

In Trixie Joliette's scheme of life, risk, especially moral risk, was not to be considered in comparison with the gratification of one's bent. Heart's desire

stands before everything on Broadway. If this girl was in earnest, if she longed as much as all that for Bohemia, was it not the bounden duty of good nature, good fellowship — Trixie's substitute for a conscience — to help her?

Trixie made her talk more and was convinced that the girl, however crude was no fool. Trixie remembered the time when she was crude herself — never as ignorant as this, but infinitely simpler and less worldly wise — and she knew of more than one case of utter country girl who had put on in a little while a wonderful veneer of citification and blossomed out in diamonds and fine raiment. She could see Ruth, after a chrysalis period of six months or so as semi-maid, semi-companion to a clever and accomplished woman like herself — Trixie believed in herself a good deal — at last casting off the husk of her dialect and the angularity of her "action" along with her chintzes and gingham. She made Ruth stand up and sized up her face and figure and decided that the girl could very soon get a chance to appear in some Frivolity spectacle in a role which only called for ability to wear tights and simper.

Ruth saw that she had made an impression and pleaded with a sort of feline charm. Trixie still hesitated. Her strong inclination was to say yes. Her easy going nature pulled strongly in that direction, but some unstified remnant of scruple in her, some outcropping of the sentiments of the church-choir epoch of her life, made her uneasy.

Then she thought of Stephen Eltringham again and her face clouded. She interrupted Ruth in the middle of an entreaty.

"Shut up," said she almost angrily. "I can't hear the wheels in my head grind with your chatter."

Ruth fell back a step and stopped talking between syllables.

"I'll tell you what," said Trixie at last, "you come in to-morrow — you live near here, don't you?"

"Not very far," Ruth answered evasively.

"Well come in to-morrow — let me see — come in about noontime —"

"I can't, I've got to git pop's dinner."

"Well, come whenever you please and I'll tell you then whether I'll have anything to do with you or not. No, don't talk to me any more. Get out, I want to get up and dress. If you waste any more of my time I'll drop you right now. Maybe I'll take you if I don't see anything new against it. That's the most I'll say. Get out."

Exit Ruth full of hope.

"Who's that telegraph pole with the chalky face?" was the question Trixie put to Stephen suddenly between dances in the Elf Inn barn that night. The barn was glorious with Chinese lanterns, bunting festoons and greenery. Two fiddles and a harp from Wiltwick made music and Stephen's Japs had possession of the supper department.

Stephen and Trixie were standing face to face in

the yellow moonlight outside. The musicians were playing by way of interlude a cheap sentimental air from a current comic opera success. Stephen was in his velvet jacket, and bareheaded. Trixie looked bewitching in a sailor hat and a white walking dress with scarlet bows.

"Who's that telegraph pole with the chalky face?" she said.

Stephen looked at her puzzled.

"She calls herself Ruth — Ruth Fear or Ruth Free or something of that sort."

"Oh, Ruth Freer," said Stephen, outwardly cool though really rather taken aback. "How did you come across her?"

"Is she the chippy you're throwing me down for, Stephen?"

"She certainly is not."

"Will you swear it, Stephen?"

"Well, damn it, yes, if you want me to, I will swear it."

"All right, Stephen."

"What have you to do with her anyway?"

"She wants me to take her to New York."

"The infernal little fool."

"That's what I told her, but she says she'll walk if I don't take her."

"Well, let her. Then it won't be your funeral. But, I tell you, Trix, she's crazy, that girl is. If things go wrong, she'll be shooting herself in your

flat or turning on the gas and you won't like that."

"What's the game, Stephen? Don't you want me to take her away from you?"

"If I wanted to keep her, I don't think you could. Do you, Trix?"

She knew she couldn't.

"Then why are you so interested?"

"I'm not. Take her if you like."

"All right, Stephen, I won't."

She told the girl as gently as she could, the next day, of her decision. Ruth cried and begged her to modify it, but Trixie was quite a determined person and couldn't be budged.

"I bet that's Stephen Eltringham's work," Ruth at last burst out in a blind rage.

"No," said Trixie loyally, "it's just my own decision."

"Never mind, I'll make him pay for it an' you too. See ef I don't —" and Ruth ended the interview with a painful Saxon noun on which she banged the door.

CHAPTER XI

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM FEELS HIS WAY AND FURNISHES ENTERTAINMENT TO GODS AND WOMEN

ONE of the first things that Stephen Eltringham did after his passage at arms with Mrs. Seaman was try to learn the truth of Mayhew's relations with Virginia. Though he told himself that he was free to enter the lists for the girl — if he were so minded — he was a little uncomfortable about it. If Charley were very seriously entangled, it might be the duty of friendship to back out; he had no idea that he was hopelessly entangled himself.

At first he thought he would ask Charley the question point blank. Then he realized with dismay that he would be bound by the answer. If Charley claimed actual standing as a suitor, there would be nothing left for him but to retire from the field — literally get away from Winnesook. The shock that this idea gave him ought to have opened his eyes to his own condition, but it didn't. On the contrary, he regretted that he was not certain enough about his intentions to take the second best course and tell his comrade that he was going to woo and to win if he could.

He compromised. He made up his mind to find out how the land lay through a little finesse.

Two or three days after the visit of Trixie Joliette and her companions to Halestown, Stephen and Charley sat in the pagoda, Stephen painting and Charley a little behind, watching him and smoking. Stephen flattered himself that he knew Charley so well as to be able to read his thoughts and emotions in the tones of his voice. They talked long and merrily about the show girls and the way the country people and the sedater summer crowd at Halestown had taken them. Charley gave the opening for what was to follow. He told how Mr. Seaman had caught some rumors of the goings-on and had quizzed him mildly on the subject. The old gentleman, he said, had asked particularly about Trixie's visit to Stephen and as to whether anything really compromising had taken place during the actress's stay in the country.

"Uncle Bob's no fool," said he, "and he doesn't dream there's anything very Sunday school about either of us. But he knows where to draw the line and he'd shut the door on me as quick as a wink if he thought I was getting funny too near home or doing anything that would start talk about the family.

"Of course, he knows Trixie came here to see you, but I told him you kept her at arm's length. I told him you weren't such a fool as to do anything else in a place like this. He understands that on the stage she's somebody, all right, and that nobody can

find fault with anybody being friends with her. He knows that every fellow knows lots of women like that.

"And then I told him positively that there was not a thing about her stay here that wasn't as straight as if she'd been one of Brooklyn's 400 — whoever they are. I said that if there was I wouldn't have been within a million miles of it — staying as I was at his house the very week before.

"It's all right. He understands and if Aunt Kate hears anything about it he'll fix her all right too, so that she won't believe any lies. She trusts to his judgment in everything about what you might call the tough side of life. Though, for that matter, she's no fool either and doesn't expect every fellow to be a saint."

"I'm glad you told me about it," said Stephen. "I was worried for fear the thing would be misunderstood. I like your uncle exceedingly and I quite realize that he wouldn't like a damned accidental scamp like myself to come in as a sort of bridge between his family and the Tenderloin. But you know I was more than careful."

After a pause: "I was careful on my own account and even on Trixie's; but I don't mind saying to you that I was doubly careful on account of my acquaintance with your friends up on the mountain."

"Oh, as far as that goes, I understand. You needn't tell me. You always keep your head. I

would be likely to do some fool thing that would seem far worse than it was. But you always have one eye on the game and the other on respectability."

"Certainly," said Stephen.

"My conduct," he went on, "is my own affair. The front that I show is my neighbor's concern. It's he who has to look at it. I am not a hypocrite; I make no false pretenses; but a fellow, who puts anything in himself that may be offensive on show, is a cad."

"Sometimes only a fool," said Charley.

"Anyway I'm glad there is no chance of a misunderstanding on the hill," Stephen remarked, "for I like your uncle. He seems no end of a good fellow."

"One of the very best," interjected Charley.

"The whole family suit me," Stephen continued.

"Mrs. Seaman is a charming woman."

"There's no one in the world I think more of than Aunt Kate except my mother. She's been lovely to me all my life."

"I should think she was kindness itself and she's one of the most entertaining women I ever met."

"Aunt Kate has lots of brains. You've no idea what a stunning looking woman she was when I was a boy."

"She's a handsome woman still, and the mother of handsome daughters. What a delightful girl your cousin is."—This was where Stephen inserted the probe.

Charley's face turned pink. If Stephen had been looking at him, he would have seen. But Stephen was painting coolly and steadily, with his most elaborate air of unconcern. So he didn't see.

Charley swallowed something in his throat. He paused a few seconds to get command of his voice. Then he jerked out.

"She's a pretty good looker."

"She certainly is," Stephen agreed, "but that wasn't all I meant. She seems to be a very sweet girl."

Stephen was commonplace in his praise on purpose. He would have felt it a desecration to utter words to another man which really conveyed his estimate of Virginia Seaman. The feeling was unacknowledged but it ruled.

He waited so keenly for Charley's reply that he even ceased to paint and took refuge in a pretense of studying his work as he tilted the campchair backwards. Charley was on his guard now; and who so shy as a man in love, especially a very young man? But he had not the training of Stephen; he could not veil his passion under a platitude. He adopted the most elementary form of dissimulation. It was so simple that it had the desired effect.

"Think so?" he blurted out. "You don't know her temper as well as I do."

This was very unfair. Charley knew it was unfair. He did his best to make amends. He added after a few puffs of his cigarette:

"I don't quite mean that, you know. Virginia hasn't really a bad temper. She's peppery and she has a sharp tongue when she begins. Of course, she's a very nice girl, but I just mean that anyone who buys her for an angel is going to get a surprise."

This settled the matter in Stephen's mind. Nobody could speak that way of a girl he was in love with. He was secretly pleased at the notion of Virginia's disposition that Charley conveyed. He just replied:

"Oh, who cares for angels?"

And now came days of unrest for Stephen Eltringham. Was he really in love with Virginia Seaman? That was the question which he had to grapple with. Stephen had learned to distrust his impulses. He had fallen in love and fallen out of it, as most young men do. He was certainly in love now. But was this the lasting kind of love or was it like the others?

Perhaps it was because he knew its reality — behind the curtain of consciousness, where the real seat of conviction lies — that he fretted and hesitated; perhaps it is a law of nature that we must pay the price of our finer developments in tribulation of spirit. Anyway, Stephen had never before given way to misgivings or nursed the pangs of uncertainty over the various loves of various sorts that he had bestowed upon women of various stations. The experience was wholly new to him.

To us who see the case from without, his uneasy speculation on his own state of mind — for he was only uneasy at first, progressively uneasy — is the

proof of the genuineness of his new seizure. Had it been a trivial sentiment or a flaring, ephemeral passion, it would have caused him little worry and no distress. But nobody is wise, within the realms of consciousness, regarding himself or the things that concern himself. For personal purposes, our powers of observation and reasoning faculties are worse than useless. We do not know ourselves, and we cannot guide ourselves to any really important end by the ordinary operations of our minds. All the judgments and the decisions that make for the success of the individual are reached in the subliminal regions of the soul.

So Stephen Eltringham vivisected himself by day and night without reaching a conclusion. He instinctively possessed the higher ideal of love and marriage and, feeling that not only his own life but that of his partner was staked upon the issue, he told himself that there must be no mistake. There were days when he felt so sure of his sincerity that he had trouble in overcoming the impulse to walk up to the head of the Clove, lure Virginia into some secluded place and have it over. Then inevitably came the reaction. Fencing with Mrs. Seaman, asserting his right to be a wooer if he so thought fit, was one thing. It was quite another to take the irrevocable step of claiming the girl from herself. Would it be for his happiness and evolution? And would it be for hers?

And would she have him? There was another question. He had wooed her little. He had only a

look, a thrill of his own to feed his hopes. There was the very point. He hardly knew her — or she, him. What was she really? That outward loveliness, that firm, flexible grace, the candid air, the exquisite poise, the exhalation at once of warmth and delicacy, were they the material expression of a womanhood in which love and beauty were the ruling elements to a degree which would meet the cravings of his nature? Or were they a mask for some average type of femininity? She was so young. What would she grow into? She was just a rosebud. When she unfolded herself to the day, might not her beauty be blighted with the barren purity of the snow? Or, what if she should blossom out all crimson with excess of physical vitality?

In the depths of his consciousness, Stephen gave no countenance to these fears. They were all on the surface. But the whole conflict was a superficial one. Nothing interfering, it was certain to be ended in a very short time by the transition of his real purpose from latency to the active and conscious will sphere. But there was an interference which served as a drag, a brake on the development of his intentions.

The next night after Trixie and her rout had restored peace and decorum to Halestown by their departure, Stephen and Ruth Freer met at the angle of the road at the Black Cross Clove. There was nothing unusual in their meeting. They met every time Stephen went up to visit the Seamans, because Ruth

was always at the Clove angle when he walked home, "singing to her beau." They met some other evenings also, because Stephen went up to see if she was there. It had become a habit with him to meet her and talk with her and he enjoyed it. They usually sat an hour or so on the log and then walked down to the village together. Sometimes she was eerie in her talk and conduct and her wild cry awoke the wilder echo from the heart of the Clove. Oftener, she was sane and gay and talkative. Stephen felt some disappointment when she was quite normal. It was the uncanny phase that most interested him, but her coarse, shrewd, vivid utterances on village life and character always amused him if nothing more.

There was no actual love making between them. They never exchanged a word of endearment. But at some moment each evening Stephen's arm found its way about her. She sat and walked in close contact with him and laid her head on his shoulder. They always exchanged kisses at parting and sometimes at meeting, but rarely between whiles.

This particular night, Stephen was more demonstrative than usual when he stopped her song by pulling her back from the brink of the precipice. He held her against him a moment or two and kissed her several times. She rested passively against his sustaining arm but she returned all his kisses amorously. Then they sat down a foot apart, he smoking, she bending forward with her elbows on her knees, watching a firefly between her feet. Neither spoke for five

minutes. Then she sat up straight and half faced him.

"Well, Stephen," said she, "you cut off my chance for New York, didn't you?"

Not knowing how much or how little she knew, he looked at her inquisitively.

"Oh, you needn't lie about it. I don't know what you said or what you did, but I know it was your work. That blamed hussy of yours was a-goin' to take me down an' teach me actin' one day, an' the next when I come back she sends me to Halifax. You med her do it, didn't you? Who else would or could?"

"Maybe she changed her mind when she thought it over."

"You're mighty smart with your mebbes!"

"Maybe she thought it would be bad for you to take you to New York?"

"Much she cared about me!"

"New York is not the place for good girls, who don't know city ways."

"Much she cares about goodness!"

"Oh, more than you think. She was probably trying to be good for once and to do the best she could for you when she refused to take you."

"Do you think I'm a blamed fool?"

"Oh, not a — blamed — fool. But, if you prefer it, maybe she didn't want to be bothered with a half crazy little jay that would be getting run over by a trolley car before she was a day in the city."

"That ain't it nuther. She liked me. After a while she wanted to take me, an' she thought I'd make a fortune, too, as lots of other girls has done. Why can't you be honest, Steve, and own up you med her give me up?"

"Oh, all right," said Stephen, "I don't mind admitting I did what I could. You exaggerate my influence with the lady. I didn't make her do it, but I told her some good reasons why she shouldn't and — well she's no fool."

"All right, damn you, I knew you did it. Well then, you'll take me yourself. See ef you don't. I'll make you do it."

Stephen only entertained for a moment the notion of getting up, leaving her to herself and refusing again to have any intercourse with her. In a second, he said to himself that it would be attaching a ridiculous importance to her. So, just to let her see that he wasn't taking her seriously, he laughed gaily and asked her whether she would prefer to be sent by telegraph or slow freight. She dropped her chin into her hands once more and sulkily watched the place where the firefly no longer shimmered. In a few minutes, she stood up and said:

"Let's go home."

Stephen let her walk by herself. She asked him a lot of questions about how long he was going to stay in Winnesook, and what his subsequent plans were. Then she tried to get him to talk about the Seamans, and several times made mention of Virginia. He

answered briefly and evasively. At his garden gate, she came to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Stephen," said she.

"For what?" he asked.

"For losin' me temper up yonder. I didn't mean anything you know. I reckon you're right; it's best for me to keep away from the big city with all its badness. But I did want to see it so."

She held up her face to be kissed. Stephen kissed her but without enthusiasm. He felt chilled and for once cautious. But a talk with Virginia, down in the village the next day, so filled him with genial glow that he forgot caution, and walked up the mountain side again that night and spent two hours talking with Ruth as if nothing had happened. They both avoided the sore topic and both were in high good humor. He was neither more nor less loverlike than usual and, while she carried her allurements as far as ever before, she certainly went no farther. Stephen would not have noticed if she had, for he was not thinking of her at all. For that night, at least, she was nothing but an emotional cloak model.

These meetings with Ruth Freer in themselves caused Stephen no sort of compunction. He was fooling and he believed she was fooling, too. He gave the matter no real consideration. If he had, he would have decided that it was diamond cut diamond, a fair game, and he would probably have added that if either player had ulterior designs it was she not he. It was only when he thought of the entanglement in

connection with his possible resolves regarding Virginia Seaman that it gave him any trouble. When he saw his own heart clearly, he was ashamed of fooling under such circumstances. But the fooling was very agreeable and he was accustomed to indulge all his whims. Perhaps — and this is the worst thing that may ever be said about Stephen Eltringham — perhaps he deliberately deluded himself as to his uncertainties in the case of Virginia and half deliberately postponed recognizing the truth of his soul, in order that the fooling might go on a little longer; for, whatever his failings, he knew — as we know — that from the moment when he joined hands with his future wife, light loves and experimental excursions into the realm feminine would be at an end forever. Stephen Eltringham was as incapable of kissing Ruth Freer after he had plighted his faith to Virginia Seaman as he was of committing a murder or picking a pocket. Men have programmes, often, that they will not confide in formula even to themselves. Perhaps, if Stephen had a programme, it was that he would enjoy his license to the limit of the Winnesook season and annex Virginia as soon as they both returned to the city, in the meantime making quite sure that he was the man for her and that she was the girl for him.

It was toward the end of July when Stephen gave his biggest festivity. An elderly widowed cousin, his nearest relative, came up to help him. He established her and her daughter in his house and to make room

took up his own quarters at Andrew Garrett's, which he filled up for a week-end with men and young married couples, while a handful of unchaperoned girls camped in his house under Mrs. Hinton's care. The feature was the Saturday night dance — they stopped all the clocks and kept it up to 2 A. M. — and it passed like a dream. Stephen did nothing by halves. A New York caterer sent up a crew of cooks and waiters and a wagon load of supplies on the Friday Day Boat. Half a dozen fiddlers and the like came up on the Saturday morning train and were driven over from Wiltwick in a stage. All the spare rooms in Winnesook were retained over Sunday for these ministrants at the feast. Mrs. Garrett achieved one of her burning desires — not to speak of earning five dollars — in being invited to manage the upstairs part of the house, where the women gave the finishing touches to their hair and put on their gloves.

Only one thing was homemade. It was the decoration of the pagoda and grounds. It consisted of those colored glass lamps strung upon wires which are the glory of the fiestas in "Little Italy." These radiated in all directions over the lawn. The Japs carried out the scheme on a mere hint from Stephen and it kept them busy all night seeing that the illumination did not wane. Besides these, two calcium lights flooded the pagoda with radiance of varying hue.

It was a still, starry evening. After dark, a wave of coolness rolled down from the mountain without

perturbing the atmosphere. It grew very dark and to the crowd that gathered on the road — all Winnesook and contingents from Cross Roads and other outlying places — the pagoda, filled with glow, looked like an opening into the fiery heart of the earth, and the revellers as they flitted to and fro, now in the brilliant light of the dancing floor and again silhouetted against it, seemed to be of subterranean weirdness. If the spectators had been learned in Teutonic folklore, they might have thought of the occasional opening of the Venusberg.

The music mingled with the noises of the night — the rush of the creek, laughing to itself in its bed, the barking of distant dogs, and the jingle of the cowbells in faraway pastures. The crowd, who were kept without bounds by One-Armed Lefferts armed with a stick and an artificial display of his most forbidding aspect, were rather overawed by the scene than exhilarated by it.

Wildly excited after an hour of the music, Ruth Freer, however, tore up the mountain road in frantic haste and shrieked herself hoarse to the Spirit fettered down in the Clove, alternately reviling him and entreating him to come up out of his dungeon and take her, too, to the land of lime light. She danced her unfit dance and cracked her thin voice screaming her trivial little ditty until she was overheard by a party of rustics from the top of the mountain on their way home, and, when she would have hidden, she was dragged out by the boys into the road and made the

object of innumerable "Landsakes!" by the women when her identity was discovered. This occurrence had notable consequences.

Stephen's dance was the first grown-up affair that Virginia had ever attended; her mother had in contemplation a tea to launch her formally in Brooklyn society on her nineteenth birthday in November. All the delicious tremors, that the conventions of fifty years ago attributed to the coming out girl, held good at the end of the century in Virginia's case, for she had not run the gamut of juvenile parties by which the average maiden of to-day has the edge taken off her social enjoyments before she is supposed to be out of school. Virginia in the glory of her first low necked gown had more than common thrills of joyous anticipation. The plain-spoken admiration of her brothers and sisters, an unquenchable spark of pride in her mother's eye, her father's kiss and an expert opinion from real New York gave her confidence that she was good to look upon. And this was life and hope to her now.

The Seamans were of the late arrivals; except a few other cottagers and one or two boarders from the Notch Inn at the head of the mountain road, all Stephen's guests were either in his house or within a stone's throw of it. So, when Virginia stepped out of the ivory living room with its subdued soft glow, she was dazzled by the white brilliancy of the pagoda and dazed by her own whirl of anticipations. The music mingled with the talk and laughter. She

caught the throb of the cello and all but mistook it for the beating of her own heart. A thrill of joy ran over her and her half scared face cleared into smiles. Then her eye lit on Stephen, tall and taper, presenting her mother to Mrs. Hinton. He turned and shook hands with her cousin, Grace Marshall — the expert opinion from New York — and as Mrs. Seaman took the latter from him to present her to Mrs. Hinton, he looked across her shoulder at Virginia.

Virginia saw him flush to the roots of his hair; there could be no mistake about it. She could hardly keep down tears of delight. Stephen as he approached seemed to see that mist of light again exude from her eyes and shimmer before them. He held her hand just a second looking down into her face with his polished, fascinating smile, uttering a word or two of conventional greeting, but some way conveying direct from brain to brain a thrilling sense of his admiration. She passed on to her mother and Mrs. Hinton, full of happiness. Then Charley squeezed his way up and whirled her off in a two-step; she seemed to herself hardly to touch the floor and her spirits bubbled up and over in girlish effervescence.

The evening was a triumph for her. She danced like the spray of a cascade and she found every dancing man in the company claiming her hand. Stephen danced with her twice and it was delightful, though he hardly said a word — just smiled down at her. So far as her circle was concerned, he devoted

himself more to her cousin, a brilliant, dark-haired, dark-eyed girl who, in a dress showing lilac under gauze with silver spangles, looked like Titania, escaped for a night from her court to share the better revelry of men. Stephen danced and laughed and flirted with her assiduously, vanishing with her more than once into the dining room or out upon the grounds.

Virginia watched it all without the suspicion of a pang. Again and again, she saw Stephen's eyes following herself about the pavilion, and, towards the very end of the night, she caught his eye in the midst of an animated conversation with Miss Marshall. He looked steadily at her for a second or two and the expression of his smile changed from somewhat cynical gaiety to unmistakable tenderness. Miss Marshall, who caught the change, turned sharply around to see whom he was looking at. Virginia blushed ruby red, but joined the group when her cousin beckoned to her, and was in a moment the gayest and the chattiest of the three.

As the two girls sat together in a summer house on the Seaman place the next day, Grace Marshall, who was two years the older and a decade ahead in experience of life, turned to Virginia and said:

"Has Mr. Eltringham proposed to you yet, Genia?"

"Why, Grace!"

"Oh, don't try that with me. If he hasn't, he will,

and you know he will, and what's more, you know you're going to have him."

It was so true and the attack was so direct, that Virginia didn't dare make denial. She bent her head over her lap and toyed with a book, her face burning crimson.

"Oh, you needn't be so put out. I guess almost any girl would take him. I might try for him myself, only I know when a game is lost to begin with. He's handsome and amusing and I heard Charley tell your mother he inherited eight or ten thousand a year from his father. I know he has the entrée to the Newport set. Of course, eight or ten thousand wouldn't carry him far there, but they say he's really clever and he'll make a fortune when he gets married and settles down and goes into business and gives up his painting fad."

"But he just won't," exclaimed Virginia, sitting bolt upright, too surprised and angry to be coy any more. "He just won't give up painting. He'll devote himself more and more to it. He'll paint pictures like Raphael and Turner and Sargent, and he'll become great and famous and the whole world will talk about him."

"You romantic little idiot!" said Grace Marshall pityingly.

"Maybe I am," replied Virginia, turning quite pale and surprisingly hard and cold, "but I'll tell you, Grace: perhaps there's some truth in what you

think about Mr. Eltringham and me; — only don't say anything to mamma about it yet — but if I thought that his marrying me would make him give up painting, I'd sooner go down and jump over one of the waterfalls in the Clove and be killed than have him. I wouldn't care for him if he'd do it, and, besides, I wouldn't ruin his future — papa says he has one. And I'd say the same thing if he had no money at all and we'd have to starve till he could sell his pictures."

CHAPTER XII

THE MOMENT MISSED

It took a couple of days for the news of Ruth Freer's wild pranks on the night of Stephen Eltringham's dance to make its way back to Winnesook. Then, it did not create half the sensation that might be expected. Nothing that Ruth Freer did ever caused much surprise among her neighbors. Besides, the dance itself dwarfed all other subjects of interest. Ruth's eccentricities were commonplace, but the dance was unique in the village experience.

Of course, the women talked a little about the queer discovery of the girl screaming and waving her arms — so it was described — at the Black Cross Clove. But they never guessed that it was a habit of hers, and they generally set it down as a sort of hysterical outburst caused by jealous rage at not being invited to the dance — as indeed it was in part. The incident would have passed into total oblivion but for one of those coincidences which we choose to call queer, but which are actually happening almost every day of our lives.

Who has not observed that when some name of person or thing unknown to us turns up in our read-

ing or talking, we meet with it again and again in the course of a few days! It may be a celebrity, a scientific law, a curiosity of nature, familiar to everyone else, which has escaped our notice. Once it dawns upon us, some design of Providence seems to keep forcing it upon our attention. Who has not observed that when we meet by chance an old acquaintance after long losing sight of him, the likelihood is that chance will again throw him in our way, two or three times in rapid succession, or perhaps may steer us to encounters with other members of the group that he has been associated with in our life?

Thus it happened that, whereas Ruth Freer had made her strange visit to the Black Cross Clove and sung to her goblin sweetheart and danced among the trees by the roadside perhaps five hundred times without discovery, no sooner had she been detected once than another accident must occur to complete the revelation. It was about a week after the dance when Myron Brandt, a bullet-headed young brute, one of the good-for-nothing scapegraces just out of their teens who were the mainstay of the tavern, started stumbling home one midnight so tipsy that he passed his own door and was nearing the western edge of the village when the sight of a white form, coming out of the shadow of the trees that lined the road beyond the houses, sent a chill to his spine and temporarily sobered him. He was too stupid to be superstitious, but there is an instinctive thrill in white

forms gliding about in the darkness. Myron would have turned and run if his feet would have obeyed him. As they wouldn't, he leaned against a gate post in the shadow of a willow and recognized Ruth Freer as she passed. Then with drunken astonishment he saw her enter the fenced patch about her home, stealthily raise one of the windows and climb through it.

He forgot all about it in the morning. But it came back to him with a rush the next time he met Ruth by daylight. Then his slow wit began working. He had heard of the discovery on the night of Stephen's dance and it occurred to him to wonder whether there was not some connection between that escapade and his own queer encounter. He at first made up his mind to watch the Freer house alone by night in the hope of further developments; but the secret was too big for him, and when he got a glass or two of bad whiskey in his skin he blabbed it to his cronies in the tavern. These in turn whispered the story to all their acquaintances and in twenty-four hours practically every unmarried man in Winesook and some of the married ones knew it. The majority simply laughed at it as a drunken dream of Brandt's and dismissed it from their minds. But half a dozen, the very worst crew in the village, took it into serious consideration. They discussed it night after night, they theorized upon it, and they weighed it as a promising opportunity for excitement. It be-

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came an obsession with them, and at last a couple of the very toughest made up their minds to find out the truth.

There was a rainy spell of a few days which forced a postponement of their plans; but, the very first clear night, they were rewarded as they crouched under the same willow whose shade had concealed Brandt. They saw Ruth Freer come down the road from the Notch about half-past eleven o'clock, steal noiselessly along the village street, enter the gate at her home, push up the window and disappear through it into the house. They went home filled with wonder.

The most intelligent of the cabal, when the subject came up for discussion at the tavern the next evening, suggested by way of explanation:

“Mebbe she’s one o’ them sleep walkers.”

This at once became the favorite theory. It was within village comprehension and it fitted in with the popular notions about Ruth. The two watchers, however, talked the matter over by day and easily convinced themselves that she was wide awake. That night the whole posse, six or eight of them, went out to watch, with what villainy stirring in their blood only He who knows all secrets may judge. This time, they went some distance beyond the village to where an old quarry road, along which there were a couple of small houses, forked with the highway. They chose this spot, so that they might judge where she came from. It had occurred to them that she

might be sitting up part of the night with some sick person. About eleven o'clock they hid in a dense thicket and waited in silence.

They had lost much of their patience, and nearly all their courage when the rolling of a pebble caught their ears. Watching by the roadside in the dark with unacknowledged purposes of felony in one's breast is scary work, and a snap of a finger would have stampeded the crew. The next moment, however, the murmur of voices reached them, and the white figure of the girl and the dark figure of Stephen loomed up on the road, for the couple, speaking low, as people will in the dark, and treading noiselessly in the dust, had approached within forty or fifty feet before the ambushed village braves had become aware of them. Now, it was too late to run. The watery spirits of the watchers made them crouch lower among the leaves lest they be detected — all the more because they saw they had a man to deal with and not merely a defenseless girl.

Then came the recognition of Stephen, a moment so tense that they almost jumped out to the road in their excitement. But Garrett Horn, the ringleader, and, naturally, in a crisis the most abject coward of the lot, gripped one by the arm and hissed along the line, "Quiet! Still!" So Stephen and Ruth passed, all unaware, and had parted as usual and reached their respective houses before the gang ventured to creep out into the road and trust their voices in speech.

Decency forbids the repetition of what they said; the vocabulary of the country tough exceeds even that of the stews in vileness. They exhausted it upon the girl. They all had grudges against her. Disregarding the half-formed designs with which they had set out that evening, they said a few things about Stephen, also.

"What fools we was never to think of it," exclaimed Horn, "we mought 'a' known that Miss Stuckup with her stand-off airs 'd be just the one to play light-o-love to Mr. Damnfine from New York."

"Yes, she'd rather be his harlot than one o' our wives," said Brandt, who was most conspicuously of all unfit to have a wife. "She ought to be sent to the Workhouse."

Thirst for revenge masquerading as virtuous indignation now inspired the discoverers. They went down to the village inciting each other to new excesses of speech and already speculating on the chance of using their secret for their brutal gratification. They had a bottle of whiskey with them and they went to the bridge at the sawmill and sat on the stringpiece while they drank it. That didn't take long and as no more could be bought at that hour of the night they went home.

Before breaking up, they all swore to keep the discovery secret and they did for one day, chiefly because they mounted guard over each other. They all cut work, and, buying two bottles of whiskey, trooped off to an abandoned bluestone quarry, where

they threshed out the whole situation, starting on the basis that "something should be done about it."

"There ought to be at least fifty dollars in it," said Brandt when they began talking.

"How?" asked Garrett Horn, scornfully. "What does he care? You can't do him any hurt by blabbin' it and he won't give a damn about the girl. Besides, which o' you'd go up an' ask it off him?"

"We might write him a letter an' tell him to leave the long green somewhere we'd settle on," said Brandt.

"Yes," said Horn, "an' have him take it over to the squire an' we'll all have winter lodgin's down to Wiltwick jail. No, there ain't nothin' into it. I've turned it all over an' I don't see a red cent in it. I wish I did."

"We might get her old dad to stir up Mr. Damn-fine," Brandt insisted.

"An' what good would that do us?" they all chorussed.

Then they fell back on ways of "getting even" with Stephen and Ruth. The favorite plan seemed to be to waylay the couple on the road, "beat up" Stephen a bit, drag him down into the Clove and duck him in the creek, chastise the girl with a shingle and then throw her into the creek, too.

"But mebbe he carries a gun," suggested Brandt.

This thought tamed them considerably. One proposed to disable him by a blow from behind; but they didn't like the risk of that, either. It might

mean State Prison. Anyway, the whole crew balked at the danger of tackling a determined man who might possibly be armed, and who might appeal to the law for redress with more than likely chances of winning it.

The next best thing appeared to be to spread the news of the illicit meetings — their conviction as to the bad character of Stephen and Ruth's meetings was as absolute as it was unfounded — and organize a "charivari" — "chivaree," they called it — for the couple some night on their way home. They had no doubt that practically the whole village would take part in such a mobbing of the "guilty" couple. And they were sure enough that if a crowd caught the pair *flagrante delicto*, as it were, some night on their way home, the proceedings would probably not be restricted to noise. Stone-throwing at Stephen would be fairly safe and the women might be trusted to inflict ignominious punishment on Ruth.

The drawback to the plan was that the owners of the secret got no special advantage out of it. This was very bitter to them, so they decided to postpone action and look into the possibility of catching Ruth apart from Stephen. They were not above satisfying their anger upon her alone. The difficulty was to catch her. They recognized that they could do nothing after she left Stephen without arousing the entire village and, no doubt, bringing him down upon them as well. As to her movements earlier in the evening, they as yet knew nothing. They de-

terminated, therefore, to set a watch and find out the whole programme. Brandt and Horn, after much bickering, were selected as scouts. They were to watch Ruth an entire night, first of all being forced to swear many horrible oaths that they would not use any discoveries they might make for their own exclusive benefit.

Fate, however, moved faster than the Winnesook braves. The scouts got too drunk on that particular night to follow Ruth Freer. The next day, the secret was a secret no longer. The tongues of its possessors were once more loosed and inside the twenty-four hours almost the entire community knew all that there was to know and something additional. In the meantime, other momentous things were happening in the career of Stephen Eltringham.

The scouts lay in wait for Ruth and Stephen the second night after their designation. They stole behind her up the hill about half-past ten o'clock, and when they saw her stop at the Black Cross Clove they crept noiselessly into the thicket along the roadside, reaching unobserved a point less than a hundred feet from where Ruth conducted nightly her weird amorous rites.

First, Ruth leaned out over the precipice and shrieked her thrilling cry of "Winneso-o-o-ok."

From far up the Notch, as if in answer, came the sound of music, faint but clear, except when the wind swept through the trees and it was lost in the wild gibberish of the leaves.

Cold sweat broke out on the faces of the two spies, and for the next two hours they lay in abject superstitious horror.

Ruth leaned many minutes over the brink of the chasm, eagerly listening. Then, as the music ceased, she again let out her piercing shriek.

"Winnesoo-o-o-ook!" she screamed.

The echo came back clearly and articulately: "Winnesoo-o-o-ook!"

Then she began to sing and dance in the flickering shadow of the trees. At moments, it seemed to the watchers that she vanished off the earth, then she would reappear, twisting and writhing in frenzied contortions.

"She's a witch," gasped Brandt, licking his dry lips.

"Oh, God, I wish I was out o' here," muttered Horn with a sob.

They would have got up and run away if they had dared, but not for all they ever hoped in life would they have revealed their presence to her. At the very least they would have expected to be flung over the cliff by Hellish power and delivered over to the devils that lurked in the ravine. It was fortunate that no animal howled in the woods that night, for if it had, the two scoundrels might have gone insane with terror.

At last, when it seemed to the pair that the night itself had lengthened out unnaturally and they wondered if day would never break to end their agony,

Ruth, after a passionate outburst of weeping and a torrent of angry complainings and curses aimed at fate, screamed a shriller "Win-neso-o-o-ook" than any before across the chasm and started down the road. The scouts crouched deeper than ever in the brush, but they hardly gave her time to get a couple of hundred yards ahead when they crawled out into the road. Full of terror at the vicinity of the Black Cross Clove, they hastened their steps so that they soon caught sight of her ahead of them. Stepping lightly in the soft dust they kept her in view all the way down, not indeed with any purpose of carrying out the programme on which they started that night; but because even her presence was less dreadful to them than loneliness on the mountain side in the broken state of their nerves. The result, however, was the same. They saw her pass down the village street alone. They noticed that all was dark and still in Stephen's house, and they saw her enter her father's lot, open the window of her room and creep in as she had done before. Then they skulked home, dodging every shadow and quailing at the twigs that clutched their sleeves as they hurried along.

The reason why they did not witness any meeting between Ruth and Stephen was that this was the night when the Seamans entertained their friends and acquaintances with a dance at their house, and Stephen was, of course, one of the guests. If not quite as elaborate as his own party, it was a very pretty affair and much more numerous, as the Seamans not

only knew all the cottagers in the vicinity, but also invited a majority of the guests at the Notch Inn. Having no pagoda attached to his house, Mr. Seaman set up a tent, which, with the sides open, a smoothly planed floor laid specially for the occasion and no end of lamps with burnished reflectors, made a very good place for dancing. The house gave room for everything else, and Chinese lanterns dotted through the grounds afforded the young people an excuse for tête-à-tête wanderings.

This evening Stephen devoted to Virginia as far as her duties as daughter of the house would permit. He was in high spirits and his gaiety did much to vitalize the occasion. He told stories to all the men and paid compliments to all the women, dancing with some of the plainest as well as the prettiest and leaving wherever he went an impression of good humor excellently blended with distinction of character and bearing. Virginia followed him with eager eyes and ears, and in some strange way felt exalted in her own eyes through her devotion to him, regardless of what his attitude towards her might be.

It was after a dance well on towards one o'clock that they strolled out into the air, loitering a few steps beyond the constellation of lights, and, as their eyes grew used to the darkness, facing the full glory of the stars in the cool clear air of the mountain night. The crescent of the dying moon, too, shimmered among the tree tops where the great moun-

tain on the opposite side of the Notch shared the universe with the sky.

"My next dance is Charley's," said Virginia. "It is the first we've had together to-night."

"The end of joy is always in sight," said Stephen.

"It needn't be as soon as all that," said Virginia, answering the thought instead of the words, as is the way of women. "We'll stay out here through the next dance and I'll give him the one after"—the proceedings were, of course, entirely informal.

"Well, let us make old Time dance while we rest," said Stephen. "We will enjoy a little bit of life set to music. Perhaps this short experience may be one to remember all our lives. We couldn't forget the scene if we tried. Look at the valley full of shadows and every shadow has a promise as well as a threat in it; look at the mist and moonshine out beyond the valley mingled just as they are in the out beyond of life; and look at the stars—don't they look friendly to-night? And there! They are beginning the 'Blue Danube' waltzes inside and"—this with the smile that was so taking—"you are here beside me."

Virginia hardly noticed the personal allusion. But she was carried away by the whole discourse. She answered eagerly:

"Do you make friends with the stars, Mr. Eltringham? I do. I hardly know anything about them, but if they are eyes I think they are kind eyes

— and, don't you know, wise. I think when you look at the sky you feel there is really someone up there taking care of the world."

"Oh, I hope so," said Stephen. "I can't say that I go very much upon religion; but I wouldn't be an artist if I didn't believe in a Spirit in things. And I would be a very great fool if I didn't think it probable that there would be another life of some sort to give sense and meaning and justice to this."

"I have heard papa say that. But I hardly understand it. Is this world so very bad? I don't know how it is, but I sometimes wonder if Heaven can be more beautiful. Life seems to me so sweet that the little sorrows and troubles are not worth remembering. I think it's just lovely to live on and on with people you love, trying to do as much good as you can. I look forward to all my life with hope and joy; I only want it to be just like papa's and mamma's. I know they're happy and always have been — and isn't that everything?"

"For your sake — for that matter, for my own — I wish this night could go on forever — set to music, with the stars friendly and hope shining from all parts of the sky. I grieve to know that there is a to-morrow for you in which sorrow must come. I hope that when it does you may gain the wisdom to bear it lightly — the wisdom to know that everything will come right in the end."

She mused a minute or two, while the air throbbed with the waltz tune.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose it is true. Sorrow must come, I suppose. Oh, isn't it awful to think of it, the people we love must die?"

"It is awful, and yet not so bad as some other things. Death is not an unmixed evil — even the death of those we love. We often find joy in seeing beauty and good grow out of their deaths even more bounteously than out of their lives. There are far worse things than death; but I hope you never may know any of them except by hearsay."

She looked up at the sky, her face drawn as in fear. A shiver passed over her.

"I beg your pardon," said he, "for talking of such things at this time."

"Oh, no," said she, "it was I that began it. Do you know, I believe I never saw the certainty of sorrow — real, deep sorrow — in my life, before."

"I wish I knew some exorcism," said he, "to dispel the omen, that I, who, if I could, would bring nothing but joy and brightness into your life, should figure as herald of grief."

"Perhaps you have done the best thing you could do for me in awakening me out of my foolish dreams. You know, Mr. Eltringham, I want to stop being a baby —"

"A little girl!" he put in smiling.

"Yes, a little girl! I don't want to make myself old or to be one of those girls that are always trying to do something fine. I know I never could. But I want to know what life really is, and to be able to

feel and appreciate everything in it, as mamma does."

"I would certainly much rather be your master — your schoolmaster," he corrected himself — "in the lore of life than in the mysteries of death. Maybe you will let me give you lessons in life in times to come."

"I will — if you mean it," said she in a whisper.

They leaned upon the young tree trunk nailed on posts which fenced the shelf of rock that was the limit of the Seaman garden. Virginia's heart beat wildly. It came upon her that now was the time. She expected Stephen to go on and tell her he loved her. She had seen it in his face all night, she had caught the meaning in the tones of his voice as he had spoken to her that moment.

She was right. Stephen had been debating with himself all night, whether he was not sure enough of himself to speak. He had walked with her to that spot all but resolved to do it. But then, as he stood with her, he had looked down the Clove, and thought of the corner of the road a mile and a half below, where perhaps at that moment Ruth Freer still stood "singin' to her beau," and waiting for him to walk down the road with his arm about her, and kiss her goodnight.

Then he could not do it. He sickened at the idea. He must be absolutely free and clean before he could ask such a girl as Virginia for her love. He didn't doubt now that he was going to ask her some time — soon — and he would lose not a moment in clearing

the way. Before he saw Virginia Seaman again, he would be freed of all other liens and able to look her in the eye when he spoke to her. But to leave her and go to Ruth Freer, even for a last meeting, that vulgarest of all incidents in passing loves — Faugh! It was impossible.

Yet, even now, with this last encouragement he might have done it. He turned his head to say the word in her ear, to call her by name, "Virginia!" feeling that he would take her hands as she turned to him in response, and then go on to the sweet end.

But Kate came bounding down the garden walk with bumptious summons to go back to the dance.

Mrs. Seaman had missed Virginia — not without shrewd suspicions — and had organized Kate into a hasty rescue party.

"Oh, well," said Stephen, straightening up. "We will talk more about it another time — soon, very soon."

He took her hand and held her by the fingers a moment as they walked side by side towards the house. His touch was too light to be called a pressure; it was too chaste to be called a caress. But through their finger tips in contact waves of that subtle nerve fluid which the medicos call electricity but which is surely something else besides, flowed from the heart of each to the heart of the other, to and fro.

CHAPTER XIII

THE UNLUCKIEST IN THE BOOK

ALL the next day, Stephen painted feverishly and well. He was full of elation — that dangerous elation, though he did not know it, which, as Romeo found out, tempts fate to its most dangerous surprises. All his doubts were now resolved; his programme was formulated. He was only waiting for the hour to act.

Charley Mayhew walked down the Notch road in the afternoon in rather low spirits. Stephen, in the atmosphere of his own dreams, found it hard to realize that anyone could be downcast that day, and rallied him. It was cruel; but Stephen did not guess the cause of Charley's pain. Charley felt a dull resentment and soon went away.

Toward nightfall, Stephen received a chill. It was after dinner and he was sitting on a bench under a tree just at the spot where, nearly a hundred years before, little Ruth Freer used to lie on a bearskin while her grandfather hoed his cabbages. He was smoking to kill time when he espied Lefferts hurrying up the road from the village. Some instinct of

expectancy kindled and he was not surprised when the man came directly to him.

"Mr. Eltringham, sir," said Lefferts; "I've got some bad news for you. Leastways, it seems bad to me. Mebbe you won't think so, sir; but anyhow I thought best to come and let you know what's goin' on."

"Well, Lefferts, what is it? They're not going to run me for town constable, are they? Or are they going to send the Deacon up to convert me?"

Stephen gave a short cynical laugh.

Lefferts looked even more melancholy than usual. Plainly he was reluctant to speak. Stephen's cigarette had gone out; he lit a new one, waiting in his aggravating way for the other to go on, without encouraging him.

"I hope as you won't think I'm a-pryin' into your private secrets like," said Lefferts, coloring. "I ain't that kind of a man, an' I may say, sir, as I never suspicioned what they're sayin' until this same blessed evening, sir, when they told me of it."

Stephen stood up at this and rested his foot on the bench and his elbow on his knee.

"Well, what is it, Lefferts?" he repeated, this time with a friendly intonation.

"Why, I tell you what it is, sir. They have it all around among the men and mebbe some o' the women, too, for all I know, that you've misled Ruthy Freer and that you and she meets every night somewheres up in the mountain."

Stephen did not answer at once. In truth this was a terrible blow to him. He deliberated a moment as to how he should reply. Then he knocked the ash off his cigarette with his little finger.

"It's in the main a damned lie," said he in a subdued tone, cold but not unconcerned. "As for the statement that I have injured the girl in any way, there is absolutely no truth in it. It is true that I have met her from time to time on the road at night, but that is because she has a crazy habit of going up to the Cross Clove at unearthly hours, and I have to use the road, you know; there is no other way up and down the mountain. When we have met, we have talked and walked down together and that is all."

Stephen had an uneasy sense that it was not quite all, and Lefferts had heard quoted the unanimous testimony of the six prowling scoundrels that they had seen Stephen and Ruth pass them on the road with his arm about her waist. However, he said nothing.

"Of course, you understand, Lefferts," Stephen went on, "that so far as I am concerned, I don't feel under any obligation to excuse or defend anything I do — to anybody. I am talking with you about the thing and denying the story — truthfully denying it — simply because it does that girl an outrageous injustice."

"Yes, sir; yes, Mr. Eltringham, I understand," said Lefferts in reply. "But if I may be so bold as

to give you advice, sir, I'd be keerful — very keerful, sir, from this time on. They're talkin' putty hot about it, sir, and there's no tellin' what they mayn't do, sir — violence, sir; I mean violence; that's what they're talkin' about."

"What, to me?" asked Stephen with a half laugh.

"Mebbe to you, sir, and mebbe to she!"

"Yes," Stephen commented with an angry frown.

"I guess some of them are good enough for any villainy."

"Mebbe they be, sir, but it ain't altogether the good ones as I'm warnin' you agin. It's the bad ones, for you see, sir, your goin's on, yours an' hers, as they sees it, gives 'em free charter in their own minds for layin' hands on you, an' ef they ever do, God pity you — or at least she!"

"Yes, I suppose this is a case where the bad might be worse even than the good. Well, thanks, Lefferts! I'll attend to it. I'm quite able to take care of myself and I'll put Ruth on her guard. By the way, is there any danger of an outbreak to-night?"

"I think not to-night, sir. I ain't sure, but I guess they ain't quite worked up to it yet."

"Very good, then they'll never get another chance. Don't worry, Lefferts, and believe me, Ruth Freer is as white as the snow, so far as I'm concerned. I pledge you my word on it."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, Mr. Eltringham," said Lefferts, and he went on up to the house.

Stephen was deeply depressed by Lefferts's story.

He burned with rage at the evil construction put upon his venial trifling. But even worse was his dread of the consequences as the libel became more and more widely bruited. He sat a long time thinking, and not a ray of light came to him. The more he thought of it, the gloomier seemed the prospect.

About ten o'clock, he went upstairs and changed the clothes he was wearing for a dark suit, which made him practically invisible in the moonless night. He put on a pair of rubber soled shoes, and dropped a loaded revolver into each of the side pockets of his coat, where it would be ready for instant use. Then he threw over his arm a dark cloak, an Italian affair, which he affected in the country in preference to an overcoat on chilly nights.

He went out at the back of the house and, skirting the lawn on the side nearest to the mountain, jumped over the wall into the next field, crossed this diagonally and, stepping over another wall, reached the roadside amid a clump of bushes. He waited until Ruth Freer passed him on her way up the mountain, and three or four minutes more to see whether she would be followed. There was not a sign of anyone on her trail, so he stepped briskly but cautiously after her, and, overtaking her, kept her in sight until she reached the Cross Clove. He halted again for full ten minutes to see whether she would be attacked from any ambuscade. Then he coughed to attract her attention and walked up to her. She had already begun her wild screaming to the Demon of the

chasm, but he caught her sharply by the wrist, and threw about her the dark cloak, which covered her white shirt waist, and rendered her practically invisible, too. Then he made her sit down on the tree trunk where they always sat, facing the road, however, instead of the gorge.

She looked at him with astonishment, but submitted. He sat down beside her and prepared to light a cigarette. He caught himself just as he was going to strike the match and threw it away.

"There's no use in taking chances," he muttered.

"What's the matter, Stephen?" she whispered, laying her hand on his arm. "Is there any trouble?"

He kept silence a minute more, considering how he would begin. Then he unconsciously followed the lead of Lefferts in making the communication to him.

"I have some bad news to tell you, Ruth," said he.

"Bad news to me?" She gave a bitter laugh.

"There's some that's beyond bad news, an' I'm one o' them. Mebbe you mean bad news to yourself, but what for d'ye want to tell me about it?"

"I'm sorry to say it's bad news for both of us. I wish it was only for me. It would be black enough even then; I don't know how deep in I am; but it's worse for you. It's so bad that I'm bound to say I don't see daylight for you. We must talk it over."

"Well, what is it, anyhow? I'm not afraid of anyone, are you?"

"Yes, I am; damnably afraid. It's only fools that are not afraid of anyone. This is what's the matter. They've found out about these crazy midnight trips of yours. And they've found out that I meet you here sometimes and walk down the hill with you. And — well, they put the worst construction on it; they infer that there's something wrong between us. You understand?"

"I guessed as that was it when you acted queer. Well, who cares?"

"Don't you care anything for your reputation?"

"I don't care for what they think of me"—and she waved her hand towards the village with the old gesture of utter contempt. "They're of no account, nohow, and I spit on them. They may think and say what they like about me. They won't turn me one inch from the way I want to go."

"Oh, very well," said Stephen. "But I can't look at it in quite the same way."

"You weren't so touchy when you had that painted hussy up here. You're not goin' to tell me you care for what they think. I thought as you were more of a man."

"I don't care in the least for what they think, if you don't; but I care horribly for what they may say — and what they may do."

She gave a short, bitter laugh.

"Oh, you don't want your grand friends on the hill to hear that you've tangled up with a crazy, ragged thing like me!"

"I certainly don't," said Stephen, with a catch in his throat, "especially as it isn't true."

They sat in silence for good five minutes, he worried and she angry.

"What did you say they was goin' to do?" she asked at length.

"Oh, truly, I had almost forgotten," said Stephen. "Why, it appears some of the tough crowd down in the village are talking of resorting to some violence towards us — well, towards you, anyway; very likely they're afraid of me. I don't know what their idea is exactly. Lefferts says —"

"Does Lefferts know this?"

"Yes, it was he who told me to-night."

If there had been any light, Stephen would have seen her cheeks redden and shame in her eyes.

"It seems as if it might take them a day or two to get worked up to the striking point," he went on.

"Some night when they're drunk enough," said she.

"So I propose that to-morrow you go down to Wiltwick and look for a situation there. I will give you the money and pay all expenses until you get on your feet. Of course, I will remain right here. When I go down to New York in a month or so, you can come back and everyone will see that the stories they're telling are mere lies and that there was nothing of any importance between us."

"I suppose you mean well, Stephen," said she; "but I won't go. I ain't a-goin' to run away from

them. I'll face 'em on the street and let me see one o' them as dares to say a word to me!"

"But if a mob attacks you at night?"

"Have you a pistol up here?"

"I have."

"Will you lend it to me?"

He thought a while.

"Yes," said he, "if you promise to use it only if you are attacked — real violence, I mean, you know, not bad language."

"Oh, sure," she replied, "I'm no fool."

He took one of his pistols out of his pocket. He unloaded it and showed her how to use it. He made her snap it over and over again. He reloaded it and with a few explanations and cautions gave it to her. She put it inside her blouse.

"Of course, you'll see the wisdom of dropping this crazy night-walking habit of yours," said Stephen, "at least for a while."

"I don't know as I need to," said she. "But I'll be more keerful. Anyhow, I'll wait a day or two."

"Well, you realize at least that it won't do for me to meet you any more. That would be the height of folly."

"Oh, you're takin' the excuse to give me the shake, are you?"

"Well, I'll be honest about it. I intended to propose to-night, anyway, that we give up these philanderingings. They are unfair to you. They can lead to nothing but harm to both of us. I will be glad to

see you and chat with you by open daylight in the village. But, aside from this disastrous lie that's in circulation, on general principles we had better part good friends and forget this foolishness."

"That's a hard kind o' way to come at a girl," said she; and he realized that she was crying. "But I see how it is; there's someone else."

"You can't fairly put it that way, Ruth, for in all conscience we've never been lovers."

"Oh, no," said she, "but I wish I'd never seen you. Mebbe I'd be married to Lefferts now an' quit bein' a fool. Why didn't you let me go with your actress woman, when you have no use for me but to drop me cold like this? What claim had you to interfere?"

"I acted for your good. As for Lefferts, what's the matter with having him now?"

"After what you've told me he told you to-night?"

It was Stephen's turn to redden with shame.

"I suppose I might twist him around," she resumed after a pause. "But that ain't it. It is that I've had a peek out into life — real life."

Stephen had no difficulty in completing the syllogism in his mind. She added hardly, after a few seconds:

"I don't know as it is that I care about you at all. But I've got above everything here."

"Well, do you want to go to New York to Miss Joliette now? I suppose I could fix it for you. I'm

not keen on it; but if you're as set on it as ever —"

"I'm not. I don't want to go anywhere now. I don't know as I care about anything, anyhow."

They sat a long while silent and wretched. Once Stephen thought he heard a foot on the road and he leaned forward and listened intently. It was a false alarm. Ruth drew the cloak about her head and stooped until her face was almost on a level with her knees. Stephen waited patiently. Presently she lowered a corner of the cloak and, turning her face to him, said in a tone of intense despondency:

"I wish you could tell me how, Stephen."

"How to do what?" he asked, though he knew perfectly well what she meant.

"How to go to him," she answered, pointing to the Cross Clove.

"Don't be foolish, Ruth," said Stephen.

"You're a fine one to say that to me!" she exclaimed angrily. Springing to her feet, she rushed to the edge. She shrieked across it frantically, "Winnesook!" again and again. Then she began her contortions and her singing, with passionate intensity, breaking them off at last to appeal to the spirit of the Clove.

"Winnesook," she wailed, "can't you show me the way? Show me in a dream. Oh, why doesn't the lightnin' burn me up, or the earth open under me feet and swallow me, so as I'll be yours forever and ever, body an' soul, body an' soul, to give you your freedom and then be with you till the Judgment Day,

huntin' among the trees and lyin' in the sun along the creeks, an' hatin' an' despisin' all the white men in the world an' mebbe killin' 'em when we got 'em alone in the woods? "

The fit of frenzy degenerated into a burst of hysterical weeping, in which the name of Winnesook was the beginning of every paroxysm. Stephen let her have her way. His apprehension of any attack, then and there, had ceased as the hour grew later. It was now after midnight and, barring the faint chance of being waylaid near the village, he knew that the danger was over for the night.

Ruth presently dropped at full length on the thin grass and lay sobbing weakly. Gradually she grew quiet. Then she wiped her eyes, got up, readjusted her dress and her hair, and came back to the log, sitting down in her old place. She shivered and Stephen put the cloak around her.

"Well — let's go home," she said after a while.

She had lapsed into a mood of apathy. As they started, Stephen took her hand, instead of putting his arm about her as of old. They walked in the main in silence. He tried to say something cheering; but she made no reply, scarcely seemed to notice. She gazed ahead as if she saw some vision in the sky that was always dead in front of them.

When they reached the gap in the loose stone wall bounding Stephen's place, she stopped.

"I'll see you safe into the house," said he.

"Oh, no, someone might see you and tell," she an-

swered, "an' your friends on the mountain 'd be shocked."

"Just as you please," said he. "I'll stay here, anyway, and if anything happens I'll get the alarm. You will know I'm here for the next five minutes if you should want me."

"Want you!" she exclaimed bitterly.

He stood facing her, twisting his moustache between the thumb and second finger of his left hand, but looking very penitential and unhappy.

"What's the use o' wantin' you, Steve, when you chuck me back to the pigs an' chickens an' them brutes an' fools down there?"

She looked at him with a mournful smile.

"Well, there's no use a-puttin' it off," she continued. "Good-by, Steve!"

She put her hand on his shoulder and held up her face to be kissed. He put his arm about her and drew her to him.

"Don't be downhearted, Ruth," said he gently. "You'll find it will all come right in the end."

He stooped over and kissed her. She flung her arms about his neck and kissed him again and again, eagerly, almost passionately. Then she suddenly pulled away from him and started down the road. The cloak slipped on her shoulders and she jerked it off, turned back and thrust it towards him. He tried to grasp her; he was torn with conflicting impulses. Pity for her and something stronger than mere admiration, that strange fascination which had so often

made him seek her at the angle of the Clove, were for the moment uppermost. So he grasped at her, but she eluded him, springing back and leaving him with the cloak in his hands and trailing in the dust. Before he recovered himself, she was a hundred yards on the way to the village. He lit a cigarette and sat down on the end of the wall where he had first seen her. This was, so far, the blackest moment in his life. He abominated himself. He loathed the prospect of the future. Could he ever cleanse himself of the degradation of that parting? "Giving her the shake!" How the phrase stuck in his memory with its unveneered expression of the vulgar truth! Would it be possible for him to recover his self-respect sufficiently to offer his love to a girl like Virginia Seaman?

The next day about noon, the Seamans' "hired man" drove down the hill alone in the buggy, and drew up at the gap in Stephen's fence. Stephen was sitting in the pavilion, very gloomy, and stepped to the edge to meet him. He handed up a letter and said there was no answer expected. Stephen gave him half a dollar and waited for him to drive out of sight. He turned about and went back up the hill.

Stephen shook all over as he sat down to read the letter. He could hardly make out the lines, his head was in such a whirl. He caught the drift at a glance; but he had to con it over, again and again, before he mastered the meaning word for word. This was the letter:

My Dear Mr. Eltringham:

I know I need not tell you how grieved I am to write this, but I may rely on your own good feeling and sense of propriety to show you how necessary I must feel it under the circumstances.

You are no doubt aware of the painful story that is being circulated about you and a young woman in the village. Mr. Seaman has been catching hints of it for the last week or so and yesterday it was told to him with such details as make it impossible for us, as we feel, to ignore it.

I think I may fairly say that neither Mr. Seaman nor myself gives any serious credence to the story. We believe that at the most there may be some indiscretion that can be easily explained. But our position is a very peculiar one with our two young daughters just approaching womanhood and considering the way gossip is invented and grows in this place both among the country people and visitors, we feel that we cannot be too guarded. It would never do to have anything like scandal associated with our household, and it is useless to deny that this story has become a scandal in Winnesook and all hereabout.

What I have to ask or to suggest is that you should suspend your very pleasant visits to us for the present, until matters are clearly explained and the scandal blows over. I put it to yourself as a gentleman and a man of the world, whether it will not be better to do so. I misjudge you grievously if you would not be willing to do all in your power to save a delicate situation which is certainly not of our creating.

Once again, I want to assure you that neither Mr. Seaman nor I take the current story literally, and we both hope that when it is all explained our pleasant acquaintance with you may be resumed and that we may see you at our home in Brooklyn.

We shall leave the mountains earlier than usual this year.

Faithfully yours,

KATE MAYHEW SEAMAN.

By the time Stephen had mastered the letter in detail, all other sentiments had been swamped in his

soul by burning rage. Though they may have done things just as bad, it always stirs up men's intensest anger to be accused in the particular instance wherein they are not guilty. Under his cool exterior, Stephen concealed a furnace of passions. The habit of years prevented these from ever bursting into flame. But, within, they seethed all the more fiercely on that account.

The envelope dropped on the floor and the letter was crumpled in his hands. His eyes became blood-shot and his cheeks dark brown with the suffusion of blood under the tan as he sat quite still, holding in his anger and beating it down, down, down in his breast, trying to crush along with it the anguish of despair. He clenched his teeth until his mind was diverted to them by sheer physical pain. His chest heaved and his nostrils quivered. In this first paroxysm, even his love for Virginia was swept away. It was not the mere loss of her that seemed to be important then, but the manner of it — to be so misjudged!

Ikumura came out of the pavilion to say that luncheon was served. Stephen waved him off.

"You seek?" he asked as he gazed at the apoplectic face.

"Sick? No; go away," said Stephen.

He picked up the envelope and refolded the letter and put it back. His hand shook so that it took several efforts before he succeeded. He put the letter in his pocket and walked into the dining room, stag-

gering like a drunken man. He sat down at the table and mechanically made an effort to eat what Ikumura set before him. At the third morsel, his dry lips revolted and he stood up. He filled a wine beaker with whisky, drank it, and went out. He put on his hat, and started back from his house for the woods—that direction led off from the Notch at right angles.

As the strong liquor began to work, he recovered possession of his faculties. His rage burned with no less intensity, but his reasoning powers began to assert themselves and he grasped the necessity of wearing out his first storm of passion, so that he might take counsel with himself upon the situation.

Was this the end? Must he give up Virginia? Or could he humble himself presently to make apologies and explanations and beg for her hand? And what was her attitude? Did she know of her mother's quarantine measure and acquiesce in it?

In his wrath, he exaggerated the sacrifice both of himself and Ruth, as he now chose to regard it. Then he glorified her unnecessarily in morbid contrast with his censors. She would not be capable of a false and cruel blow like this, he tried to convince himself.

Presently he thought he had cooled sufficiently and, though bitterly resentful at the necessity, he returned to the house to write a reply to Mrs. Seaman. He determined to repudiate the charge indignantly and at once demand Virginia's hand. He sat down to the

task, but after a couple of futile efforts abandoned it. It was too soon. He could not control his anger. His rage broke out hotter than ever and he was beset by a temptation to harness up his village cart, drive to Ruth's door, compel her to put on her Sunday finery — the antique white hat with the frayed black velvet bows and the disheveled daisies, the shiny black silk cape that was once her mother's and the muslin dress with the lilac and yellow figure and the washed yellow ribbons — then parade with her through the village, up the Notch road past the Seamen's house, and take her to dinner at the Notch Inn, giving the small but exclusive group that patronized that establishment the most startling experience of their lives. This was a perilous conception. Stephen Eltringham never in his life came so near the brink of the discreditable as he did just then. He had a streak of perversity in him, and this wrong-headed, vicious, irrational slap at respectability, in retaliation for the blow it had dealt him, took an almost irresistible hold on his fevered imagination and unstrung judgment. What saved him was the instinct of refinement, the æsthetic sense, the thing in him that made him an artist and not a lawyer or a broker. The revenge was vulgar; it was unlovely, and the notion of it disgusted him before he had time to turn the thought into action.

Then he took to the woods again, and wandered on for hours, forgetting the progress of time in alternate moods of wrath and anguish until he found himself



overtaken by evening, and compelled to make his way almost in the dark to any road he could find. He came out of the woods near Halestown without guessing how far he had wandered and turning northward expected to reach his home in a short time.

But walking in the dark in the country is no easy thing. It is hard to keep in the road, and harder to keep out of the holes and ruts. Every mile lengthened out to two. Stephen had fully eight miles to cover, so it was on towards ten o'clock when he reached home. Weak from hunger, fagged with the difficulties of the tramp, more or less fatigued indeed — though at this time he used to boast that he did not know what fatigue was — he sat down to his belated dinner. He could not have told you to save his life what the thing before him was, though usually such a lover of good things; but he ate heavily from sheer physical need. He also drank heavily, first spirits, then a couple of tumblers full of claret, and finally brandy with much coffee, made poisonously strong by his order.

Stephen did not become intoxicated, in the ordinary sense of the word. He was, in fair days, too appreciative a drinker to drink much; and his temperament did not give him the capacity to drink deeply. In his present state of nerve tension, what he drank had no more outward effect on him than so much water.

But the food and drink restored his physical strength and with it his capacity for bitterness, for

excursions of fierce temper and for morbid imaginings. The coffee put sleep out of the question. He began to smoke and pace up and down the ivory living room, his eyes fixed on nothing but his own visions, his feet tripping in the riot of rugs through sheer heedlessness. He was in a mood of mind verging on insanity. He was primed for any deed of recklessness.

As he paced to and fro, there came a noise on the steps without, and a quick patter of bare feet running across the pagoda. There was a sharp rapping of knuckles on the door and, as he threw it open, Ruth Freer, haggard and with tattered hair, rushed into the middle of the room.

"Look what he's did to me," she screamed hoarsely, and she tore from her shoulders the chemise which, except a petticoat, was the only garment she wore.

Her back was seamed across from her neck to her waist with livid weals.

"Look what he's did to me," she screamed again.

Stephen stood gasping, his hand to his forehead, with vacant, bloodshot eyes.

"Who did it?" he asked huskily.

"My father," she screamed back; "they told him."

"By God, I'll kill him," said Stephen, looking around the room and mechanically feeling his pockets as if in search of his revolver.

"No, no, you mustn't; he's right. They told him," she wailed, now breaking bitterly into tears. "Oh, Stephen, Stephen, see what I've suffered for the love o' you, an' you throwin' me off like an old rag that you ain't got no more use fer"—and she flung herself on her face on the floor, sobbing and wailing: "Let me die! Let me out an' I'll go up to the Clove an' jump over an' end my troubles there. You don't care for me nohow an' now I'm disgraced even in my own sight forever an' ever."

Stephen knelt down beside her and began comforting her with a wolfish tenderness.

CHAPTER XIV

A CHAPTER OF WOEFUL EXPLANATIONS

THE diabolically opportune irruption of Ruth Freer into Stephen Eltringham's house was directly due to a brutal wrangle in the village tavern, that night. Gerrit Freer, the father of Ruth, had been the central figure in it. The quarrel had been forced on him and he had got the worst of it. So he went home and revenged himself upon her. Of course, he did not call it revenge. He told himself he was performing a duty.

Gerrit Freer was quite correctly described in his daughter's expression to Stephen Eltringham on the mountain road; he wasn't of much account. He was about fifty years old, looking sixty-five — men age early and die late in the country — and he had never been farther from Winnesook than Halestown in his life. His orbit was less than twenty miles in its major axis. He was a sot on the rural plan. He was never drunk in the daytime except on Sunday, and he was never strictly sober at night. He was almost always able, however, to stagger home and get to bed.

Freer worked at farm work and in the quarries

and at miscellaneous chores in a fitful, inefficient way. His father had tied up the house and the acre or so of land that still went with it by a trust deed which prevented him from mortgaging it; but it would have been sold for taxes within a year or two after his wife's death only for Ruth, who earned just about enough in the year to pay the taxes and buy a gingham frock or so. Father and daughter lived largely on the vegetables grown on their lot — also mainly Ruth's contribution. When the debt at the village store got so big that Deacon Van Camp threatened to stop credit, and the supply of pork and flour, coffee and sugar was in danger of being cut off, Freer ran into debt at the tavern for a month or so instead, until he got within the Deacon's dead line. He was always in hot water at one end or the other; the only two remedies he never thought of applying were working more and drinking less.

One year, Ruth went out as a waitress at a summer hotel, and the Deacon's account was cleared up. But Ruth reaped none of the benefit she had hoped for in the way of gay rigging. The Deacon, who was devout and canny, refused to sell her anything considerable on credit for which he was not sure he could hold her father liable at law. Old Freer simply took the reëstablishment of his credit as a license to drink harder and work less.

Ruth and her father had bitter quarrels when she refused to repeat the operation the next sum-

mer; but he did not venture to use his whip on her because a couple of years before she had thrown a teapot at him and cut his head and the village had said it served him right. He cuffed her and threatened her, however, and befouled her with the vilest that his tongue afforded. He didn't put her out because she was indispensable to him; she didn't go because her queer Winnesook amour kept her tied to the village and in the village there was neither steady employment nor free shelter to be had. Besides, there was a strain of animal fidelity in her which held her to the old ruffian in spite of his abuse.

Gerrit Freer was not popular even at the tavern. He was a trouble maker. In his younger days, he had been in many a rough-and-tumble fight when overflowing with cheap liquor. Of late years, he could not get other men to fight with him. The older ones were dead or settled down; the younger ones, though they had no respect for age — or anything else — preserved enough of traditional manhood to refuse physical encounters with a creature of such obvious ineptitude. There was nothing the matter with Freer's tongue, however, and he often made the tavern too hot to hold him. The proprietor, Elkanah Race, inclined to concessions on account of his steady custom; but sometimes — oftenest on Sunday nights when Freer was drunk for the second time in the day and his temper and language reached the limit — he was thrown out into

the road. There he blustered unheeded until he tired himself out and then he staggered home to bed. He and his dimes were welcome again the next night.

On this particular evening, the second after the dread-stricken scouts had seen Ruth go through her incantations at the Black Cross Clove, the evening on which Stephen Eltringham raged over Mrs. Seaman's letter, Gerrit Freer went to the tavern in his customary sour state. There was the usual crowd there, Brandt, Horn and the rest of the tough gang and one or two not so young or so tough, but who still liked liquor and sociability and put up with the tavern for their sake.

Nothing in the world is more unaccountable than the repulsive squalor of the country drinking place in America. In its indecent grime and naked banality it is more vulgar than even the ornate city liquor saloon. The need for drink and sociability which makes men resort to such a place must be a vital one. And its brazen reliance on the extremity of that need, as rendering not merely the amenities but the decencies of life unnecessary to its success, is the fundamentally offensive thing about it. It is not the ugliness; it is not the dirt; it is the deliberate indifference of the man behind them that is sickening. But after all it is only one more example of the general truth that in respect to the actualities of life, there is none so cynical as the true-born countryman.

The Winnesook tavern was a bad specimen of a bad thing. The paint had turned muddy without growing mellow. The smoky walls were bare save for an ancient whisky sign, a farm machinery almanac with the elapsed days cancelled by a dirty wet finger and the hideous red and yellow poster for the coming county fair. The chairs were rickety; the tables were sticky with arabesques of stale beer. The five foot bar displayed a couple of dozen heavy dull glasses — characteristic products of the protective system — streaky where the second or maybe the tenth hand water, in which they were dipped after use, had dried upon them.

When Freer entered the place, an offensive snort of amusement went around. Freer was astonished at it; he was accustomed to a reception of indifferent silence or else perhaps to open abuse on the part of someone who was already drunk. There was that in the general horse laugh to-night which gave him a shock, and he sat down at a table by himself, ordered whisky and tried to puzzle out what it meant, while he pretended to read the last number of the Munster County Republican organ.

The explanation, of course, was that the murder was out. The whole village except himself was in the secret of the assumed relations between Ruth and Stephen Eltringham. The affair — as Mrs. Seaman put it — had become a scandal all over the country side, and the villagers, men and

women alike, were trying to stimulate themselves into a proper mood of virtuous indignation.

The situation had slipped completely out of the hands of the tavern gang. They had lost control through their scouts' delay of a single night in following Ruth Freer. During the day following the council of war in the quarry, each and every one of the six plotters had confided the discovery of Ruth and Stephen, walking in the road after midnight with his arm about her, to at least half a dozen cronies. Oaths of secrecy were, of course, exacted. They were given with copious blasphemies and broken in the next breath. Hours before the time when the two horror stricken knaves lay shaking behind the bushes while Ruth Freer shrieked and sang and postured, the story spread so fast and so far—with additions and improvements—that it was told to Mr. Seaman the next evening, at Van Camp's store when he called there to order feed for his horses and to buy some garden tools. The hints that Seaman had previously received, as mentioned by Mrs. Seaman in her letter, it may be explained, had been mere envious comments on Stephen's greater civility to the girl than to any one else in the village.

Publicity drew the teeth of the tavern toughs; all Stephen's precautions for his farewell meeting with Ruth at the corner of the mountain road were waste pains. The scouts' story of Ruth's incantations, however, had only excited ridicule. Nearly

everyone knew of the Seamans' party so the music heard by Brandt and Horn was accounted for. As for Ruth's strange conduct, the same theory as before explained it to the village intellect; she was jealous, it was assumed, at her exclusion from the revelry. This view fitted in also with the hypothesis of an amorous intrigue with Stephen. Her capers were generally construed as a hysterical outburst of rage at his failure to keep tryst with her. Naturally, the two who had witnessed the performance could not see it in this light. They knew better and superstitious dread had penetrated to their marrow. But nobody took them seriously. No countryman — or woman — ever believes the statement of another person when it conflicts with his or her own preconceived ideas.

But the notions of the gang at large or of its scouts in particular no longer mattered. They all knew that no move could now be made against the suspected couple except on a strictly "moral" plane — that is to say, under color of condign and exemplary punishment. They had sense enough to recognize that it would never do for them to undertake such a proceeding on their own responsibility and unaided. Their characters were too well known. Nobody would believe in the good faith of their moral indignation expressed through acts of pruriency and violence.

On the other hand, it was a slow and difficult task to stir up the village to a "chivaree" or other

similar performance. There would have to be much incendiary talk, and better proof of the couple's guilt than was yet forthcoming would be needed. It was very easy to launch a scandal, but hard to get the villagers to embark in an enterprise which might be tried out finally in a court of justice.

All that evening, when Stephen was trying to break off his dalliance with Ruth, the gang spent in angry recrimination over the leakage of the secret and in plotting to arouse the community to some deed of reprobation. The next day they devoted mainly to spreading the story wider and wider and stimulating the passions of those with whom they talked. They made just enough headway to secure for the girl's wretched old father the snort of contemptuous mirth which saluted his appearance in the murky lamplight of the bar room amid the reek of tobacco and kerosene.

The old man sat drinking and wondering what was the cause of the demonstration and he grew more and more puzzled as one after another of the drinkers addressed some jeering remark to him.

"Goin' to buy a new team?" asked Brandt with a leer.

"No, Gerrit won't work no more now. He don't hev to," came from another.

"Mebbe he'll wear store clothes to meetin', Sundays," suggested a third.

"Why not every day?" came from a dark corner.

"He's a gent now, he is."

The terms in which the old man, at last aroused, demanded to know what they were talking about can't be printed. He looked so dazed and at the same time so ugly that the tavern keeper, who had been enjoying the scene with a broad grin, came to his senses and called a halt.

"That'll do, boys," he jerked out in a voice that his customers knew meant business. "Let the old man alone. You see he's stone blind an' we don't want no trouble here to-night."

"But what the blank"—of course this wasn't the word—"is it all about? What's the matter with the—"

Race cut him short in a tone of conciliation:

"Don't mind 'em, pop; they're only kiddin'. There ain't no meanin' into it. They was hearin' of your new job"—Freer had gone to work driving a team for a newly opened bluestone quarry that morning—"an' mebbe they think you'll buy something to wet 'em up."

"They'll be good kindlin' for Beelzebub ef they wait for me to wet 'em up," replied the old man, and he went on growling truths about themselves and slanders on their ancestry until Race shut him up, too, with a hint that he had better get out if he was looking for trouble.

Brandt went over and sat at the table with him and treated him, talking in a strain of innuendo, which Freer's rapidly developing befuddlement saved him from grasping, though it afforded acute delight

to all the listeners. Brandt, carried away by his own jocosity, treated again and his noisy mirth extended its contagion to the old man, who grew boisterous over his own bitter allusions to the assembled compotators and their kin, male and female, allusions which he conceived to be very funny because they were grossly injurious.

At last, he stood up and tottered to the bar. He consigned the whole assemblage to perdition in the simplest and clearest terms but he announced his intention of treating.

Just as they had all drunk and the youngsters were preparing to bait the old man again for the sake of hearing his ferocious tongue wag, Silas Slocum entered the bar room and stepped to the counter, where Freer was still standing. Slocum was a respectable farmer of forty, a yellow bearded, blue eyed man.

"Hey, Silas," somebody called out, "you're just late. Gerrit's ben buyin' all 'round. Mebbe he'll do the gen-teel thing for you, too."

"Buy Silas a drink," yelled another.

"He's in on the treat," they all chorussed.

They knew there was some sort of quarrel between the men.

"I don't want none of his treats," snapped Slocum, and he ordered a glass of ale and nodded to Race to chalk it up. His credit was good and cash is scarce in Winnesook.

"No use in you wantin' it for you wouldn't get

it," snarled Freer in his high grating voice. He thumped the counter with his leathery old fist. "Nothin' ye get from me, and nothin' I want from you except the other side o' the road."

"Apple sass still good, down your way?" asked Slocum with a sneer.

This was intended to intimate that Freer had stolen apples from him. The previous year he had hired Freer for a few hours to pack up his apple crop in barrels for shipment to New York, Freer to take one barrel in payment. The consignment had not done well. The returns from it were away below what Slocum expected, so he concluded that Freer had culled the best fruit from the stock and taken it for his own use. It was totally untrue; but Slocum believed it; he had once called Freer a thief in so many words to his face, knowing that not even a country lawyer would take up a slander suit for so notorious a character. He had since pursued him with jibes and innuendos whenever they met. This time, he got the worst of it. Freer was tipsy enough to be utterly unscrupulous — he was never a coward.

"I played you fair on them apples an' you know it," he yelled; "they was mean stock like yourself; that's the truth. But who be you, anyhow, to bear false witness agin your nebbor? Mebbe you'll explain to us this minnit how Matildy got out o' jail for stealin' them thrinkum-thrankums from the woman from New York city. You're a grand one to be callin' honest folks thieves when the gold and

silver and precious stones was found concealed on your own daughter's person!"

This brought the tavern to a hush and Slocum fell back as if he'd been shot.

His daughter, Matilda, had been a waitress in a boarding house at Halestown, as is the way of thrifty country girls. She found a gold brooch and pendant in the grounds of the place and pinned it to her waist under the apron she wore. She had no deliberate purpose of theft. Perhaps she half hoped that the trinkets, which were worth \$100 or so, would never be claimed, but she always said that the only thing in her mind was the likelihood of a reward being offered for them, as often happened during the summer season in similar cases. Anyway, she failed to report the find. When a search was started for the lost gawd, another girl remembered seeing her pick up something bright and told their employer. The woman sent for a constable at once and he bluntly accused the girl of theft. She produced the trinkets, he arrested her and a country justice committed her to the county jail in Wiltwick for examination on a charge of grand larceny. The owner of the article, a good-natured New York woman who knew something of the world, had protested vigorously against the arrest; she didn't know the beauties of the fee system. She hired a lawyer, exerted herself to force an immediate hearing and procured the girl's "honorable discharge" in two days' time. But the mischief was done. Matilda

Slocum never lifted her head again. She went home to her father. She brooded and drooped and toiled. It was two years ago now and all Winnesook agreed that another spring would not see her on the earth.

The father, who was accustomed to the agonies of plain-spoken country sympathy, was for a moment stunned by the outrage of Freer's words. Then he dashed at the old miscreant and caught him by the throat. The other men dragged them apart and held them. Race urged them to throw Freer out. They would have done so with alacrity if it had seemed the most entertaining possibility of the situation. But as the two antagonists struggled in their grip and glared at each other, Slocum in a raucous whisper flung this at Freer:

"Well, anyhow, she never played the harlot on the public roadside like your Ruth!"

"Now, you got it! That sarves you well right!" shouted the whole crowd, and Freer was flung back into a chair in no gentle fashion.

"Ain't it so?" Slocum went on, turning to the other men, his voice going up into a high wailing treble. "Ain't it so? Don't we know it? Waan't she caught with her light o' love, her Mr. Damnfine, in open, brazen badness on the very village street in the middle o' the night when decent girls is in bed?"

"Sure, she was!" chorussed the crowd, and they turned on Freer and howled the truth at him and far more than the truth, calling Ruth by every foul

epithet they could think of and hinting again that the old man was profiting by her bad conduct. Slocum broke into tears and sat wailing and scolding on a beer box.

The storm almost sobered Freer. He listened to one and then another. He presently asked some questions. His attitude was at first one of utter surprise, changing to curiosity. As his ignorance of the whole business became more and more convincing, the tone of the crowd changed. They experienced a new joy in breaking the news to him. They cooled down and went into argumentative detail to prove to him his daughter's shame.

He got up and tottered again to the bar, called for whisky, drank it and paid for it. Then he made for the door. He turned on the lintel.

"I b'lieve as you're all dog-gone liars," said he. "Ruthy ain't got no use fer ye an' ye're settin' out to blacken her to git squar. I'll have the law on ye. By the jumpin' Jerusalem, I'll sell ye all up fer the slanders ye've put upon that girl this night!"

Ending up with a string of curses, he hobbled off up the road to his home.

There was a kerosene lamp turned low in the living room. There was no streak of light under the closed door of Ruth's room. The door of his own, on the other side, stood open, showing the cavernous darkness within. He reached inside for his buggy whip — a cruel tapering thing, some four feet long with a whalebone core wound about with thread. This he

hid behind his back as he walked over to his daughter's door and rapped upon it with his knuckles.

He heard her stirring inside. Ruth had spent the last hour or so fighting down her impulse to take all the chances and go up to the Clove as on other nights.

"Are you in thar, Ruthy?" queried the old man.

"Yes, sure, pop," she called back, not without a tremor in her voice.

"Ha' ye ben out to-night?"

"No, sir. Where'd I be? I ain't ben acrost the doorstep sence you went to the rumshop."

He ruminated a moment. Plainly, he argued to himself, part of the story, at least, was a lie. Then he resumed:

"Come out here. I want to have speech with you."

"But I can't. I'm all undressed an' in bed. What is it?"

"Never mind. Put summat on ye an' come out" — there was a moment's delay — "ef ye don't I'll come in an' fetch you."

This had the desired effect. Ruth got out of bed. He heard her rustling around a moment. She just added a petticoat to the garment she slept in and stepped out into the living room. He grabbed her by the arm above the elbow and dragged her to the middle of the floor, where the lamplight fell full on her face. Holding her firmly, he began:

"They tell me ye've ben playin' the harlot along the highway, nights, with yonder springald from down the river. Is it true?"

"It's a lie," she screamed, pulling to get away. "It's a damn lie. I've never ben bad in my life. Lemme go!"

"Wait, wait," he went on, gripping more firmly than ever. "Don't be in a hurry. Is it a lie that ye've ben meetin' Mr. Damnfine, this Eltringham coxcomb, up in the woods? Is it a lie that ye've ben huggin' an' cuddlin' with him in the road when honest folks is in bed? Tell me that. Tell me that, you hussy, or I'll skin ye alive!"

He watched her face as he spoke, and saw the truth in it. She struggled and strained in his hold, but the sinews of his hands were like steel wire. His fingers bruised her flesh and his nails dug into her skin.

"Lemme go," she spat at him in mingled rage and terror. "Lemme go or I'll throw the lighted lamp at ye!"

She tried to twist around to it, but he pulled her away.

"Ye will, will ye?" he snarled. "I'll teach ye better"—and raising the whip, which she hadn't seen in his hand, above his head, he brought it down whistling across her shoulders.

She gave a gasp and a low wail of pain, and shrank away from him.

"I'll teach ye," he went on, "teach ye to threaten your father, an' to play the harlot, an' to bring disgrace upon your name!"

His arm rose and fell again and again. Stroke

after stroke fell upon her back, to which the muslin nightgown afforded practically no protection. She cowered, sank on her knees, tried to roll upon the floor, but he held her fast until his arm was tired and he had struck her perhaps some dozen times. She kept wailing all the time:

“Oh, pop! Oh, father! Mercy, mercy! I’ll be good. I never did anything wicked! I’ll never do it again! Oh, God, I promise, I promise! Only no more, no more or I’ll die”—for all the world like a whipped child.

At last, the old man gave her a push from him and she fell in a heap on the floor. He stood watching her a moment, half proud of his victory over her and half ashamed of it. He turned to his room to restore his whip to its place, when she suddenly scrambled to her hands and knees, then to her feet, and sobbing and wailing dashed to the door.

Before he could interfere, she flung it open and vanished out into the darkness. He hobbled after her to the middle of the road, but she was already out of sight.

He was not a little dismayed, but the voices of the tavern frequenters, coming out as the place closed for the night, struck on his ear. He hurried back into the house.

Leaving the front door ajar, he stumbled into his room, pulled off his clothes and rolled into bed. He was lost in a drunken stupor as soon as his head touched the pillow.

CHAPTER XV

PROVES THAT THE WAGES OF SIN IS PAID AT LEAST IN PART BY THE SAINTS

THE whole world blushed in the dawnlight when Ruth Freer opened Stephen Eltringham's door a little way and thrust out her pale, haggard face to make anxious scrutiny of the road and the village. Smoke was already lazily climbing from chimney tops here and there, but there was not a soul to be seen. She stole out and pulled the door to behind her, stealthily. Then, hugging her scanty garment to her breast, she started running, still barefooted, towards her home.

She swept the street ahead of her with shivering dread, and she who was wont to be so defiant cowered behind a tree while a woman came out of her house and noisily drew water from a chain pump. When the woman disappeared, Ruth made another dash for her home, panting with fear of discovery, and let out a sob of relief as the door gave way before her and she realized that she had found sanctuary from the eyes and tongues with which shame now peopled the very atmosphere.

She dropped into a chair in momentary exhaustion.

But she soon pulled her scattered senses together. Her panic over, she was mistress of herself mentally and physically. She went into her room, dipped her face in the water basin, put on her stockings and shoes and dressed herself as usual for her morning's work. Then she went into the living room, put out the lamp that had burned all night, opened up the house, started a wood fire, put on water to make coffee and set the table for her father's breakfast.

The old man, waking out of his drunken sleep, gradually recalled the doings of the night before. A chill clutched his heart. What if Ruth had killed herself? He sat up in bed with a jerk ready to start off in a mad search for her. Then he heard the banging of the stove doors, the rattle of the plates and knives and spoons, accustomed sounds, and his terror evaporated as quickly as it had seized him. He got up and dressed and, putting on his most forbidding frown — to hide his embarrassment — flung his room door open and clattered out.

The room was full of the smoke of frying bacon. Ruth was bending over the stove turning the thick slabs and slicing cold boiled potatoes into the fat. She paid no attention to him. He went outdoors, drew water and sluiced his face and head in a tin basin. Then he went back and dried himself upon the roller towel behind the door. He sat down at the table and the girl put his food before him and poured out his coffee. He took her in out of the corner of his eye. Her mien showed intense depression and

nervous humility. As he was incapable of any generous feeling, his spirits rose at this. He mentally patted himself on the back for his vigorous paternal virtue.

Ruth did not sit down at the table, but went into her room. Presently he called to her for more coffee. She came out and gave it to him, then waited, standing by the stove, until he had finished eating.

He asked her where an old brake-shoe, that fitted the wheels of heavy quarry-floats, was. She went to a cupboard, and stooping dug out the heavy mass of metal and taking it up gave it to him.

"Fetch me my whip," he growled.

He was sure he was the wisest of fathers; he wondered why he had not tried thrashing her before — at least in so many years. He had never seen her so submissive, and he thought it was he who had broken her spirit. He was now experimenting to see how far her subjection would go.

She hurried into his room and brought out the instrument of her torture the previous night. She held it out to him with downcast eyes. He took it from her roughly and marched out of the house without a word.

This morning, however, he did not go to work. The elation, developed out of his imagined victory over his daughter, inspired him to new battles. He realized that the scandal about Ruth was going to be a very disagreeable thing for himself. It might make his frequenting the tavern impossible, if he couldn't put a stop to it then and there. So he stumped up

to the village store and laid down the law with emphasis to Deacon Van Camp and the loungers.

Banging the counter with his fist until the spools rattled in the show case and the lollipops in the glass jars, he swore with all the resources that early Biblical teaching provided him with that he was going to sue every mother's son in the village who had maligned his girl. He'd make them prove it, he would, and, as he banged and bellowed, the Deacon's spirit became as water, and he hemmed and hawed and explained and gave himself away as one of the principal disseminators of the gossip, a fact which Freer had not previously known, but which he made the most of.

Freer, with native shrewdness, went no further than facts — as they had been — warranted. He asserted the essential innocence of Ruth, but admitted the meetings with Stephen on the road, which he described as mere philandering and fooling. He told with dramatic emphasis of the wholesome chastisement he had inflicted on her for this, and warranted there'd be no more nonsense. But if he could punish her, he'd see to it that no one blackened her character. To clinch his argument he reminded his hearers of the Eltringham curse, on account of which Ruth wouldn't go into Stephen's house for all the money in Wiltwick — and wasn't that proof enough that all the worst parts of the stories about her were lies?

The old man made a great impression. His version was entirely plausible; at any rate, it was far too serious to be contradicted without evidence. He went

on to the tavern, the blacksmith's shop and the saw-mill and repeated it at each. He stopped Andrew Garrett and Schoolmaster Martin Peters in the street and harangued them. He soon came to believe it heartily himself.

In the afternoon, the impression was deepened by Lefferts's comments on the scandal. He quoted freely Stephen's declaration that Ruth Freer was as white as the snow so far as he was concerned and he expressed his own entire belief in Stephen's account of his relations with the girl. This story, of course, tallied exactly with that of the old man. There was a complete reaction in favor of Ruth. The tough gang were universally censured and she was regarded as something quite like a martyr. Thus it happened, after the ironical habit of human destiny, that her good name underwent rehabilitation almost immediately upon her forfeiture of the conventional right to it.

Even the women were won around and spoke kindly to her when she appeared upon the street. The timid civility with which she received their approaches, the change from her usual tone of insolence and contempt to one of shrinking respect would have astonished them but for the story of the horsewhipping, on which Freer dilated with conscious pride. This, they thought, had tamed her rebellious spirit and humbled her wicked heart. Sad to relate, more than one gentle maiden of Winnesook, who chose to be obstreperous in the next three months or so, was quickly

brought to her senses by a hint that she might be treated to "a dose of the medicine that did Ruthy Freer so much good."

Stephen Eltringham awoke before noon from a troubled sleep, and lay with his eyes closed, loathing the light. The most heart sickening experiences of life are awakenings to certain baleful days — the days on which we bury our dead, the days on which we face the ruin of our hopes. Who has not lain at the break of such a day, with eyes obstinately closed, complaining against Providence because the darkness would not lengthen itself out for all time and save him from the inevitable? Such an awakening was Stephen Eltringham's — the awakening, as it were, of the condemned to the day of his execution.

Crushed in spirit, hopeless, robbed of all interest in life, he walked about his house, purposeless, like a widower just returned from the side of the new-made grave. Presently he rolled the Princess of Sunshine up in her bombazine veil. He wrapped sheets of heavy paper about the picture, and glued them together so as to form a dust proof casing. He took the package upstairs and buried it at the bottom of a trunk. Then he listlessly set up a sketch of one of the waterfalls in the Notch upon his easel and went through the motions of working on it. As he sat there, miserably idling, along in the afternoon, the rattle of wheels on the road caught his ear. He

looked up and saw the Seaman carry-all coming down the Notch road. His first instinct was to hurry into the house. He overcame it, and held his ground. Mrs. Seaman and all the children were in the vehicle. Virginia waved her hand gaily, directing her mother's attention to him. Mrs. Seaman turned her head and bowed. He stood up and took off his cap, bowing to each member of the party as the carry-all drove by and disappeared in the village. He sat down with a new hurt in his breast. It seemed certain that Virginia knew nothing about her mother's letter.

That evening, he walked for hours along the country roads. Returning before midnight, he sat down in the pagoda to await the coming of Ruth. He sat hour after hour, listening to the reproaches that the creek muttered from its bed, seeing in the inky mass of the mountain the pall of his happiness. He sat on until dawn and Ruth did not appear. He gave a sigh of relief as he noticed the first brightening of the eastern sky and staggered to bed overwhelmed with fatigue, physical and emotional.

One day was like another for Stephen Eltringham now. He recovered composure and tried to work, but the dull pain was always there, dividing his consciousness with the thing in hand. From one horror he felt he was saved; Ruth Freer returned to his door on no other night.

Charley Mayhew made a trip to New York after the Seamans' party. Returning to their house the Saturday of the following week, he drove down in

the buggy on Monday to lunch with Stephen and spend the afternoon with him. Charley was gay and aggressive this time. He sat, at first laughing at everything that was said, his light, curly hair fluttering in the wind, and the wings of his nostrils quivering as he smoked and jested. Stephen was stimulated a little in the beginning. He tried to seem gay and aggressive, too, but in the end he made a bad job of it. Charley presently detected the listlessness and depression under the mask of good humor — no trace of affectation or indifference now — and marvelled much.

“You haven’t been up at the house all the week,” he remarked after a while.

A sort of spasm went over Stephen’s face, and Charley, glancing at him a moment later, realized that he was haggard and worn.

Stephen muttered, “No, not for a week or so.”

Inwardly, he said to himself: “They’re keeping it dark. They haven’t told Charley. But what does it matter now?”

“Virginia was remarking it yesterday.” (“Was she indeed?” thought Stephen. “Then she doesn’t know, either. But what does it matter now?”) “She thought you’d be up to tea. She was surprised that they hadn’t seen anything of you since the dance. I suppose she thinks you can’t sleep till you’ve danced it all over again like the girls. It’s funny how they do love to gossip and gossip over things. Virginia’s done nothing all the week but thresh it over. You

wouldn't think anyone could remember such details as she brings up — the music and the weather and the stars and the moon and the 'Blue Danube.' The stars and the moon and the 'Blue Danube' seem to have hit her hard. I didn't notice anything out of the common about them; did you? It's certain she had the time of her life. She's walking on air since. I suppose she'll dance it all over again for your benefit when you give her an opportunity. Maybe it's to escape, that you're staying away."

"I haven't been well," Stephen almost whispered.

Charley stared at him and thought he looked ghastly. His face was thin and drawn. His eyes seemed to have fallen in. He was saying to himself: "She doesn't know. She's waiting for me. And I can never go to her. What a horror! I am wringing the heart of the girl I love and I can't help it."

"Gad, you don't look well, Stephen," said Charley, with sincere concern in his voice, "what's the matter?"

"Just a cold — only a cold," said Stephen. "I caught a chill one night that I went out walking — making a damned fool of myself. I'll be all right in a few days, I suppose."

"You must be careful Stephen. Are you doctoring?"

"Yes, yes, I've taken some things — a lot of whisky; more or less quinine; lain in bed. I'm better now. I'll be all right in a day or two. It doesn't matter anyhow" — this with a drop in his voice.

After a short pause he resumed:

"I wonder what fool invented lying in bed as a remedy for illness. That's all a lie about Hell being paved with good intentions, Charley. It's carpeted with hair mattresses over wire springs."

"Anything wrong? Anything worrying you, Stephen?" asked Charley in a low voice, leaning forward, and laying his hand affectionately on Stephen's shoulder.

"Oh, nothing. What should worry me?"

"Say, Stephen, is that straight?"

Stephen looked at him inquiringly.

"Well, I'll tell you why I ask, old man. Some of the men at the hotel were trying to tell me some fool story about you and this crazy girl down in the village that they call Ruth Freer."

"Yes, damn them! I know the story, Charley. You needn't tell me."

"Of course, I told them it was a lie. I said that you were no fool and —"

Stephen cut him off with rather an ugly laugh. Charley stared at him in open amazement.

"Is there anything the matter, Stephen? Is the girl giving you trouble?"

Stephen looked shocked.

"Giving me trouble?" he repeated. "Oh, don't go off on that tack, Charley. It's on the girl's account as much as my own that the story makes me so angry. It was such a brutal injustice to her. Here, I just met her two or three times accidentally on the

road and walked down the hill with her and talked a bit. And on that they built up this infernal libel. But for God's sake, Charley, don't let us talk about it. The whole thing's too horrible. I wish I had never come up here!"

Charley was rather appalled at the intensity of Stephen's feeling on the subject. He guessed that the situation was in some way serious. He did not believe that any trifle could upset a man of Stephen's character in this way. The scandal assuredly seemed inadequate, especially if based on falsehood. Even an ordinary intrigue with the girl seemed hardly sufficient to produce the physical and temperamental break-down that was so apparent. Then, as the two sat silent a few minutes, he thought of his friends on the Hill, of the growing attraction which he had clearly seen between Stephen and Virginia. A light broke on him; he guessed a good deal of the truth.

His ignorance of Mrs. Seaman's letter, however, misled him. The theory he formed was that Stephen had involved himself seriously with Ruth Freer, and, a scandal resulting, he was afraid to continue his relations with the Seamans or to pay court any longer to Virginia. It was a conception of the situation which did far less than justice to Stephen. Stephen was now acting upon the very best impulses to which he was amenable. At this time, Mrs. Seaman's letter seemed to have happened an age ago. It was totally superseded in determining the situation by the horrible disaster of the night succeeding its receipt

by him. He was living and acting now in a sheer spirit of self-abasement, crossed with a sense of obligation to Ruth Freer to any extent to which she might choose to call on him.

Coupled with his theory, there came to Charley Mayhew a sense of elation for which he seriously blamed himself, but which he could not wholly stifle. If Stephen were out of the running, might not he himself, in a little while, make up lost ground with Virginia? Of late, he had been giving up hope and trying to steel himself to bear the loss. He was succeeding, too, for though he had been in love, it was boy love, and not a finality like Stephen's adult passion.

After five minutes of musing in this vein, Charley turned and said:

"All right, Stephen, we won't talk about it. I'm not bringing it up again. I only want to say that if you have any sort of trouble on hand and need help, you must let me do anything I can."

"Thanks, Charley," said Stephen, with a spark of real mirth. "There won't be any slander suit — or, at least, I won't bring it."

They went in to lunch and talked about many things. The afternoon was dismal. The note of trouble, like the pedal tones of an organ, which you feel rather than hear, vibrated between them and dominated every utterance.

When Charley was ready to go, he remarked:

"I'll tell them you're not well; they'll all be sorry."



I suppose I can say you'll be up in a day or two when you're feeling better. Of course you're due for a call as soon as you're able."

"Due for a call?" Stephen answered with a puzzled expression.

"Why, certainly! After the dance! Though, of course, if you're too sick you can send cards and make excuses."

"Oh, yes, to be sure; after the dance; yes, I see what you mean; certainly; I didn't catch what you were driving at; I'm stupid these days; my head is dull. But, of course, I know what you mean now."

"Well, I'll tell them you'll be up some evening before the end of the week. Good-by!"— and Charley drove off.

Stephen stood watching him drive up the mountain. He wondered idly how they would all take the announcement that he would call some evening before the end of the week. Mrs. Seaman would know to the contrary, but doubtless would say nothing. This was evidently her policy. Virginia would be glad; reassured, for naturally his absence for a whole week — and such a week — must have disquieted her; no doubt she would be solicitous when Charley told her he was ill; she would be eager to see him — what a bitter pain to think of that eagerness and to think of how he might have gratified it! Then he determined that he must avert his total disgrace in the girl's eyes. He would not have her think him a trifle or a scamp. He would not for his own sake; he wanted to fade into

something in her memory that she would not loathe. But, even more on her own account, he would not have her think too ill of him; his worst agony was his recognition that he might destroy her trust in life, shatter her confidence in humanity. He must devise a programme through which he would disappear naturally, by some compulsion or adverse fate, as it were, and he hoped that she might drop him out of her mind by slow degrees without injurious shock. This was his attitude for the time being.

He was haunted by the desire to be near her once more. He could not speak with her or even see her, but he must breathe the same air — just once. He wrapped his cloak about him after nine o'clock that night and walked up the mountain road. He stood for an hour in the fringe of woods opposite the Seamans' house and watched the lights go out one by one. He did not know which window was Virginia's; he had never been upstairs; but as the last lamp was extinguished the house seemed to float away into the general gloom until it was indistinguishable, and his whole future seemed to be swallowed up in blackness along with it. Stephen Eltringham was one of those few men to whom the mercy of tears never came. He was outwardly impassive as he turned on his way down the hill, but his stoicism covered a torture that tears were unequal to express.

Nearing the Cross Clove, he involuntarily strained his ears in expectation of hearing Ruth Freer's song. There was not a sound but the sobbing of the creek in

its bed far below. When he reached the old corner, however, she was there, sitting on the tree trunk, her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. She sat up when she heard his footfall.

"Well, Stephen," was all she said as he sat down by her and put his arm about her gently. She rested her head on his shoulder.

He was glad that she was there. He felt bound to her now, and he had to see her before carrying out any of his immediate plans. He had been wondering how he should communicate with her without stirring up mischief. After a while he asked:

"Are you not afraid to be here?"

"I waited until pop was in bed an' asleep."

"But the others?"

"They're in bed when he is. They're all turned out of the rumshop together."

"But if they were watching for you?"

"Oh, that's all off. I'm innocent, I am. They've all come over to my side. Even the women's friendly. Ain't it just too funny for anything?"

"Then you're having no trouble at all."

"No, but it's worse, ain't it, to know you deserve it? Look here, Stephen, I've ben wantin' to be bad all my life, or leastways I wouldn't 'a' cared, and I never thought as I'd give one button for what they'd think o' me. For it's as true as you live that they're of no account, nohow. But, some way, I feel different now. I'm kinder ashamed o' them."

Stephen thought of the experience of that other

couple in the Garden of Eden; but he tried to reassure the girl.

"Don't be foolish," said he, "they know nothing that can do you any harm. You will soon get over all ideas of that sort. Don't worry."

"I ain't worryin'," she replied; "it ain't worth while; nothin' matters much now; the time's too short."

This gave Stephen a stab. What was she contemplating? he wondered. He asked:

"What do you mean by the time being short?"

"Why, I've got to die soon, now," said she.

"What?" he exclaimed, sitting bolt upright in horror and holding her at arm's length.

"Why, of course," she replied simply, "it's the curse, the old Eltringham curse. I've crossed the doorstep. I've ben in the house. That's the end o' me. I don't know how an' I don't know when, but soon an' violent. That's what the curse says."

Stephen talked with her for an hour trying to argue or cajole her out of her folly. The most he got her to yield was this:

"Mebbe I'm wrong, but we'll soon know. Anyways, I don't care. I'm not a bit afraid now. I think it'll bring me to him"—and she pointed over her shoulder at the Clove. She concluded: "I feel nearer to him sence that night. I feel sort as ef I'd gev myself to him when I took the Eltringham curse on my shoulders."

Stephen explained his plans to her. He told her

that he was going down to New York for a few days. He wasn't running away from her or from the village, he assured her, and he would soon be back. All right, she said; when she saw him back, she would meet him there, at the Clove angle again if she was still alive.

Would she like him to send her or bring her anything? No, that would only be to advertise their relations and renew the scandal. They could talk more when he came back and make plans if he wanted to — but what was the use?

They kissed like brother and sister at the gap in his fence and separated.

The next day, Stephen mailed cards to Mrs. Seaman and a note to Mayhew. What a heavy task it was to make it seem light! He wrote:

TUESDAY.

My Dear Chas.:

My cold is worse and I am disturbed about it. There is no advice worth having up here and I have exhausted all my old nurse's remedies that I can remember and have only added dyspepsia to my troubles. There is only one thing to do; I hate to lose the country just now when it is at its best, but I'm not brave enough to die for it. I must go to New York at once to be doctored.

Will you give my regards to Mr. and Mrs. Seaman and all the family and make my apologies for my apparent neglect of the last week. Tell them I have been too ill to be fit for association with my fellow men. I hope to find them still here when I return — for I intend to come back for the autumn foliage — but if not I will count on renewing my most delightful acquaintance with them in New York later in the winter.

Don't be alarmed about me. I'll be all right presently.

Yours etc.,

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM.

On Wednesday morning Stephen went down to New York. He arrived really ill. The doctor put him to bed in a private hospital with a nurse to watch him and a course of sedative treatment prescribed. In a week, he was out and another week of New York restored his courage for purposes of endurance at least. For New Yorkers, there is no tonic like New York. He wrote to Charley Mayhew, telling him of his illness and recovery. He said he was going to Bar Harbor for a week or two to see what the sea would do for him and he would return to Winnesook about the middle of September to work. He invited Charley to make a long stay with him early in October, when there would be some shooting.

Stephen did not know that about this time the shadow of criticism had fallen upon Charley Mayhew's friendship for him. A spirit of unrest had arisen in the home of the Seamans. Nobody said anything; but everyone seemed to feel that life had gone awry.

Virginia fell silent after hearing Stephen's note read, announcing his departure for New York. She sat alone in the woods much of the daytime and read or seemed to read in the evenings. Charley, watching her face as he did, thought he saw in it an expression of pitiful surprise. He formed the idea that she was wondering what had suddenly stricken Stephen out of

her life — practically, her daily life. He was right. Some occult sense told her that illness was not the real reason.

One day she found Charley wandering in the glen below the house. She joined him slowly as if fighting some inward reluctance. Charley felt a constraint that he could not explain to himself. He made a commonplace remark or two. They reached a place where the creek had scored for itself a deep, narrow channel between two rocks. The bottom, a conglomerate of mingled puce and olive green, seemed speckled with gold as the sunlight, broken by the surface ripples, flickered over it. They stood on the edge looking down into the swift current for a couple of minutes. Then Virginia in a voice a full tone above her natural pitch — the note of hard internal struggle — asked this question:

“Charley, is Mr. Eltringham really ill?”

Charley looked sideways at her. She was gazing steadily into the water, but he saw that her cheeks burned red. He didn't answer for a moment or two. In fact, he was saying to himself, “I wonder is he?” At last he replied in an argumentative tone:

“He looked dreadful when I saw him. I have known him three years and I never saw him look so before. I imagine he is really ill.”

“If he looked so badly, why should you doubt he was ill?”

“That's a funny question, Genia, when you're the one that's doubting.”

"Oh, I don't doubt. I only wanted to know. You saw him and I supposed you could tell me."

"I'm certain of this much, Genia; he was in a bad way. The only doubt I had was whether it was illness or trouble. The honest truth is he seemed to me more as if he was badly worried about something."

The moment he said this, Charley was sorry. He felt he had put himself in a fix. Sure enough the next question was:

"Has he any trouble? Do you know of anything to worry him?"

To this, of course, there could be only one answer.

"No," said Charley, "I don't know of anything. But, you see, Stephen is not a fellow who tells everything. There are lots of things might worry him that I'd know nothing about."

Of course, Charley did think he knew the cause of Stephen's worry and he could not keep all trace of insincerity out of his tone. Virginia felt that he was concealing something. She went on:

"Well, do you think his illness — or — trouble is the reason why he hasn't been up since the night of the dance?"

"Why, I suppose so. Whether it was illness or trouble, he was in no sort of shape for calls and things of that sort when I saw him. He was either very ill or very down, or both, and I can easily see how he wouldn't come up when he was feeling that way."

"Have you had any quarrel with him, Charley, that he'd stay away for?"

"No, no, nothing," Charley began, shaking his head vigorously, but Virginia cut him off:

"Of course not! I'm silly; you went down to see him. Well, I wonder what it could be. He can't have been offended at anything papa or mamma ever did"—here a half light broke on Mayhew—"they both like him. He wouldn't mind that silly little fool Kate and I'm sure I didn't say or do anything. We all seemed to be the best of friends when he went home that night. I remember the way he shook hands with everyone. He seemed so friendly."

"I guess it's nothing like that," said Charley. "It's some outside thing that has upset him. He'll be all right when he comes back."

"I suppose it must be so," Virginia mused, "I can't think of anything else; but there seems to be something strange about it."

"Oh, I guess it's all simple enough. It will turn out to be mere accident, when he gets back from New York."

"You would help him, Charley, wouldn't you, if he had any trouble?"

"I offered him any help I could give."

"Help in what? You do know something."

"No, no, you're too quick. I offered him help in a general way—in any way at all that I could give it."

"What did he say?"

"He laughed, chiefly. He didn't want my help."

"Then I guess he must be ill. You're not a doctor, you see."

"Nor smart enough to help a man like Stephen."

They walked back to the house together. Virginia did her best to be cheerful and unconcerned. But Charley could see that she suffered and a bitterness arose in his soul against the man who, having won such a girl, could cause her to suffer. Stephen had been his hero, his model, his ideal — what you will; all young men have one, usually far worse chosen; it was perhaps a sign of Charley's progressive emancipation into real manhood that he permitted himself to entertain the thought that the idol's feet might be of clay.

Virginia next tried to get up courage for an inquisitorial attack upon her mother. Kate saved her the trouble.

One evening they were sitting indoors, reading around the lamp, their books in the full light, their faces in the crimson of the silken shade — just the three; Mr. Seaman was in New York, Charley was over at the Inn; the children were in bed.

"Mamma," said Kate after half an hour's silence, "don't you think it strange that Mr. Eltringham never called on you after the party and that we've heard nothing from him since he went to New York?"

If the similitude of a calm and placid volcanic eruption is permissible, it conveniently and accurately describes Kate Seaman. She was of volcanic sudden-

ness, but in voice and demeanor she was as calm and cold and colorless as an iceberg.

Virginia raised her head suddenly with parted lips and startled eyes. The crimson shade concealed her pallor. Kate, lying back in her chair, watched her with the comprehensive eye of a biologist busy over a rabbit.

Mrs. Seaman was only astonished for a moment. She looked calmly across the light at Kate, merely taking in Virginia with the experienced corner of her eye.

"Why, no, Kate," she said blandly, "it hadn't occurred to me that it was strange. Does it seem so to you?"

"Oh, I don't know. He owed you a call, didn't he — you and Virginia?"

Virginia reopened her book and bent her face over it. Her mother didn't fail to notice that her fingers twitched in the leaves so that she couldn't possibly be reading. Mrs. Seaman was not sorry for an opportunity of making the situation diagrammatically correct, lessening the shock, if any, and creating a *modus vivendi*. She replied soothingly to Kate's inquiry:

"But, Kate, he sent cards as he was too ill to come."

"He wasn't too ill to go to New York."

"My dear child, don't talk nonsense. He went to New York to see a doctor. Charley told us how badly he was looking. He might go a long way to recover his health when a short trip, like coming up

here, might endanger his life. Such things happen every day. You're old enough to know they do."

"Well, I wonder if he got sick the very day after the dance."

"I don't know, I'm sure; but you wouldn't expect him to call the very day after, would you? Indeed, we're all very thankful he didn't; we needed rest. He may have become ill, however, that day or the next, and so was prevented from coming."

"Well, I know he never before let a week go by without coming two or three times — that is once he began coming at all. I don't see why he stopped so suddenly."

"Why, Kate, you're absurd. Mr. Eltringham was too ill to come. What does it matter, anyway? We're not going to quarrel with him over a trifle like that."

"He might have written, I think."

"To whom? There was no need when he sent cards. He knew Charley would tell us why he had to do so instead of coming himself. And he did write to Charley."

"I don't care; I think it's funny. I guess he got tired of us."

"Kate, you do say the silliest things! I'm really shocked at you. Supposing you were right, what would it matter? I hope we all have self-respect enough to give ourselves no concern on any such score as that. Mr. Eltringham, after all, is nothing to us but a pleasant acquaintance, casually made. If

he passes out of our lives we will look upon him as a nice person to remember and that's all. Probably the acquaintance would hardly go much beyond the summer, anyway, for his circles are not ours. We don't know the same people — except Charley — and the most we could expect would be to see him once or twice in the winter. The whole matter is not worth a thought; only, in fairness, I must say I don't think Mr. Eltringham ever intended to be rude, or that he has been rude. I am very sorry he is ill."

Kate dropped the subject and resumed reading; so did her mother. Mrs. Seaman felt much better for the talk. She was quite sure in her mind that Stephen's illness was the direct result of her letter. It grieved her, but did not make her repentant; her pose was that of the judge who has just done a stern duty. However, she admired his tact in sending the cards and beating a retreat. She was unwilling to be unjust and she was very desirous of saving Virginia, whom she credited with a passing school-girl inclination for Stephen, the pain and humiliation of regarding herself as jilted. Kate had given her a beautiful opportunity, as she thought, to smooth the future for her daughter, and be quite fair to Stephen at the same time. Good-womanwise, she was only too glad to seize the opportunity to further her own plans at the same time, by indicating the temporary and trivial character of the Eltringham episode in their lives. This, she thought, would help Virginia to open her eyes and get over her folly, Charley would natu-

rally step into the vacant space whence Stephen was expelled, and then the wedding bells would ring.

The fact is, that, much as she loved her, Mrs. Seaman did not understand Virginia in the least. In addition, though she had loved her husband tenderly, faithfully and deeply from the day of their marriage and had been happy in her love for him, she hadn't loved him at all before it, and she knew nothing of ideal or impulsive love, so that Virginia's case was altogether outside her comprehension.

After listening to Kate and her mother, Virginia felt more isolated than before. Only she, with her recollection of the bedroom incident that night about a month ago, could appreciate Kate's deliberate cruelty — the characteristic cruelty of feminine adolescence. She now knew to a certainty what she had before only felt instinctively, that in this trial she lacked her mother's sympathy. She knew perfectly her mother's method of suggestion and she had no doubt that every word addressed to Kate was intended for her.

After that talk, she was spiritually desolate. The fear that Stephen was seriously, perhaps dangerously ill gnawed at her heart every day and all day. Her only refuge from it was the soul-stunning possibility that he was not ill, but was deliberately abandoning her. Then came the racking quest for the reason. Had she done something to estrange him? Was he false and cruel and had he amused himself by fooling her? No, she always loyally answered; that could

never be! Then, had some outside person or thing dragged him away — causing him to suffer and become ill — and, if so, who or what? There was no answer to this.

Charley was like a brother to her these days. He had recently felt the sting himself. He felt it even then. It was bitter to him to see her suffer for the love of another while he suffered for her. He spent all the time he could with her, walking, driving, talking. He taxed his animal spirits and resources of mind to the utmost to keep her interested and she was deeply grateful and loved him much — as a brother. But she noticed that he never by any chance mentioned Stephen Eltringham except once or twice when she asked if he had letters. She also observed that his jaw set and his face darkened as he answered in the negative. She resented this, for she understood the unspoken censure of the man she loved — there was a tacit understanding as to the whole situation between her and Charley — and she would not believe that the man she loved was deserving of censure.

One day they drove down to Winnesook together in the buggy to get the mail. The horse was skittish and Charley sent a little boy into the post office for the letters. There were three or four of them. One was Stephen's to Charley, written in New York, announcing his recovery and departure for Bar Harbor. It happened to be on top. Charley thrust it hurriedly into his pocket, but Virginia saw it and recognized the writing. They put the other letters,

all for Mrs. Seaman, behind them on the seat and started to drive home. Charley blustered at the horse and tried to make funny remarks about the people they passed. Virginia smiled gently at his fun and, half in jest, half in earnest, told him it was he who was exciting the animal.

In driving up the Winnesook Notch, it is necessary to stop frequently to let the horses recover breath. There are places at short intervals where the rock has been pared away, widening the road into coves, where drivers halt, leaving the way clear for other vehicles. As Charley drew into one of these, some distance up the Notch road, Virginia said to him:

“Now read it, Charley.”

He colored to the eyes. He thought he had been quick enough to prevent her from seeing the handwriting. Without a word, he took the letter out of his pocket and opened it. Virginia turned her head away and looked down over the side of the buggy while he read.

Presently she heard the rustle of the paper as he put the letter back into the envelope. She turned to him and asked:

“What does he say?”

Charley hadn't the heart to tell her in words. He just handed her the letter. She read it quite quietly once, twice — folded it and returned it.

“Drive home as quickly as you can, won't you, Charley?” she said in a low tone, but without any particular sign of emotion. She seemed rather dazed.

Charley urged the horse all he dared.

"Damn him!" he suddenly ejaculated, almost with a sob, as they reached the scene of the Princess of Sunshine incident.

"I thought you were his friend!" retorted Virginia indignantly. "Or do you want to teach me that all men change their minds and their feelings so easily?"

"I used to think I knew him. Now I know I didn't."

"If this is just the way it seems, none of us knew him. But I think I did know him. I do know him. I know him; I know I know him. I couldn't be deceived and it isn't his fault. I won't believe it is. I won't believe it, if he says so himself. It's all a puzzle and, Oh, such a pain, Charley! I'd give my life to understand it. But I'm sure Stephen Eltringham never meant to treat me meanly. Hurry home, Charley, I want to get where it's quiet and think it over."

She filled Charley with admiration as she faced her mother and the children placidly, as if nothing had happened. She disappeared for a couple of hours until tea. At tea, she coolly told the party the contents of Stephen's letter to Charley and made Charley read it aloud, and she never winced even at the semblance of levity which it had cost Stephen so much toil and pain to put into it.

CHAPTER XVI

CULMINATES IN A GRAND DEMONSTRATION OF POPULAR MORALITY

THE Seamans had left the country ten days, when Stephen returned to Winnesook in the last week of September. Mrs. Seaman had put it on the coming out of Virginia. Her nineteenth birthday was to be the occasion; it was on the twenty-fifth of November and there were dresses to be made and other preparations. This was true enough; but in addition, the season seemed to all prematurely chill. Virginia said nothing. It was hard to find any precise thing in her demeanor or conduct that expressed suffering; but after she read Stephen's letter there was an intangible change that made her mother uneasy. Without realization, Mrs. Seaman had a feeling, almost a fear, that the girl of her heart was unhappy and that she herself had started the loom of fate weaving for her the Nessus tissue of humiliation and disappointment. It did not add to her comfort when the stories of Ruth's rehabilitation and, inferentially, Stephen's, were borne to her ears. In her inmost soul she repented having played auxiliary to destiny.

To Stephen, the departure of the family was a re-

lief. What he wanted now was delay — time to think, time for a new alignment between himself and the world. He had recovered command of his own forces and he began to wonder if the battle before him was as much of a forlorn hope as he had regarded it in his first anguish of repentance for his double, his triple sin — his sin against his own hopes as well as against the two girls with whom he had entangled his life.

While he was in New York, he invited a number of young men to his house for October to shoot hares and partridges; but he took care to go up a few days ahead of the earliest party. The first business of his new campaign was to see Ruth Freer and ascertain her disposition and her plans if she had any. He regarded her as the pivotal figure in the situation. For the time being, she had first claim on him.

The day after his arrival, he walked down through the village. He knew the news of his coming would be abroad and he calculated on her throwing herself in his way. She did so. He was struck by her appearance. Pale as ever, with the carmine lips and the luminous eyes, she seemed to have gained spirituality of expression and dignity of carriage. Just the suspicion of a blush lit up her cheek bones as he took off his hat to her, meeting her near her own house.

“Fine day, Ruth!” said he.

“Good day, Mr. Eltringham! When d’ye get back?” she replied.

It was the first time she had ever called him Mr. Eltringham. The inevitable eavesdroppers greatly admired the improvement in her manners, and were still more amazed by it.

They exchanged a few words of commonplace. Stephen lifted his eyebrows interrogatively just a second and she nodded her head so slightly that nobody but he noticed it.

That night he wrapped his cloak about him and once again walked up the road to the angle of the Black Cross Clove, to meet Ruth Freer. He found her sitting on the tree trunk, elbow on knee and chin on hand, gazing steadily through the tattered autumn leafage down into the heart of the glen. There was a bright yellow moon in the heavens and the atmosphere was filled with a thin, luminous haze.

She took no notice of Stephen as he sat down beside her, but in a minute or so she turned to him, and, attracting his attention, pointed with one finger through a rift in the trees down into the notch.

"Do you see his eye?" she asked. "Ain't it terrible bright, and kind o' cold, too? It 'most makes me 'fraid."

Stephen followed the direction of her finger and was startled to see what looked like a gleam of phosphorescent light, far away down in the hollow of the darkness.

"I think he's gettin' free," Ruth went on. "He's strugglin' to the outside o' the earth. He must be

lookin' out through some hole in the rocks to view the woods he's comin' back to. It's so, Stephen; true an' sure. You never could see his eye before."

"It's a moonbeam reflected from the water down there," said Stephen. "Perhaps there's some new pool formed that catches it."

"D'ye think that's it? Mebbe it is. I thought o' that, too. But it don't seem so to me. I never see it before a night or two ago in all the times I've ben up here, in all sorts o' moonshine. An' then there seems to me to be a meanin' in it, like a human eye. It seems as ef there was love in it for me. I hope it ain't as you think it."

"Ruth, this won't do. You're getting more morbid than ever. You are fretting too much over what has happened"—he put his hand gently on her arm—"why don't you face the world bravely? You're all right now with everyone in the village. Make a new start and try to get something out of life. Come, cheer up!"

"You wouldn't want a girl to be very frolicky like when she's goin' to die, would you?"

"What nonsense! You make me angry. You're just as well as I am and I have no hope of death though I may have much reason to wish for it—more than you, perhaps."

"It ain't that. It's the curse. I've took it on me, an' I can't git away from it nohow. I've got to die. I feel surer an' surer of it every day. I don't know when it may be or how. But it's comin'.

I wish I could know ef it'll jine me to him. That's all I care about. D'ye think it will?"

"Why, you foolish girl, there's no 'him' for you to join. Don't you know that story's all nonsense? There are no devils except in ourselves and we're only too surely joined to them. Anyway, there's no Indian down there, either in flesh or spirit or pickle or preserve or any other way. Wake up out of your foolishness."

"You can't tell me nothin' about it. I have a feelin' in my heart, and what does your mere talk amount to agin that?"

"And this fool talk about a curse—don't you know that the only curses are those we bring on ourselves?"

"Well, didn't I? Didn't I go up to the house, when I knew it was sure death?"

"Oh, I don't mean that way, I mean that we curse ourselves by our bad actions. That's what I have done. But even that curse, I hope may be lifted. If we try, Ruth, to live down the sins we commit, instead of being curses, they may in the long run turn to our good. I believe that everything will come right in the end"—He dropped his voice and spoke as if to himself—"if not in this life, at least in the next."

"Yes, that's it," said she, "I hope it will be all right in the next world, when me an' him goes hand in hand."

Stephen contended with her for an hour. He

offered to send her to Wiltwick, to New York, to do anything or give her anything she might ask. She wanted nothing and would have nothing. Above all, she would not go away.

"Don't take on so," she said once, "it ain't no fault o' yours. You didn't bring me there, 'deed I couldn't this minute tell you what did. 'Twaan't no will o' my own no more than you pullin' me. It jest had to be; so I run up never thinkin' what I was doin'."

"That's the way everything happens — Never thinking."

"Well, I ain't sorry. Don't think I'm afraid. Ef it brings me to him, the wish o' my heart is won. An' I know it will; I'm only wonderin' how. Course, it's a kinder solemn thing to die. Would you b'lieve it, Stephen, I can't sing no more? My voice seems to crack when I try. An' I can't dance for him no more. I tried to do it when I saw his eye fixed on me. But I got faint an' sick all of a sudden an' had to give up. It's all I kin do to call out his name. I feel heavy an' queer all the time, so that there's days when I wish it was over. But I wouldn't undo it. I'm ready to die when he calls me. It's only the waitin' that's sad."

When they parted at the gate — she again and again refusing every offer of aid or service — she stood back so as to prevent any attempt to kiss her in the old way. These were her concluding words:

"Don't you come up to the Clove no more,

Stephen. I ain't mad at you; I don't say it unkind like. But I'd rather be alone with him."

"As you will, Ruth; but if you ever need help in any way, you'll call on me at once. You promise?"

"All right, Steve. I promise. Honest!"

And so they parted.

Stephen asked Lefferts the next day what he knew about the Eltringham curse. Ruth's attitude had taken some hold on his nerves. He seemed for the moment to feel the wings of death fluttering in the air.

"'Most nothin', Mr. Eltringham," said Lefferts, "an' I guess no one alive knows much about it now. I often take blame to myself for it. It's a shame that an important thing like that should be forgot. I mought ha' knowed the hull story easy. My Granddad knew it. I've heerd him tell it with particulars, but I was only a boy an' I paid no special heed an' now I disremember 'most all about it. That's the way with boys; they don't know enough to listen an' heed when their elders is speakin'."

"Very true," said Stephen. "A man named Voltaire once said something of the same sort. But don't you recall anything of your grandfather's tale? What was the curse, for instance?"

"That, I'm sure on. The curse was death; but I don't know whether it was allus to be death by fire or how. It was sudden death o' some sort."

"That's cheerful, and on whom was it to fall?"

"It was on the Freers, I'm sartin; an' none beside.

It was on them ef they went on the Eltringham land or acrost the Eltringham doorstep — I don't rightly know which. For safety, they've ben keepin' clear o' the hull place far back o' my memory."

"But why should the Freers any more than anyone else in the village be cursed off the place?"

"That's the story as I forgit. It was summat about a girl as got married. Somehow she ran away from her father an' married into the Freers an' he cursted her an' when she tried to come back she was burned to death an' the curse was on all her breed. But that's what I don't rightly understand, for ef she was burned, where would her breed be? It was all right as the old gent used to tell it. But I haven't got it straight an' I guess it's lost forever now."

"Does Ruth Freer's father know the story?"

"No better'n I do. I've tried to get some particulars out o' him that would piece in with my own recollections; but, Lord bless you, you can't get nought sensible out o' him! He says he knew it all long ago but he's forgot."

Stephen's friends presently began to arrive. He tramped through the mountains with them, a gun over his shoulder, and watched them shoot. He resumed painting, too. He kept himself occupied all he could, and, though the bereavement of his love was never absent from his consciousness, he gradually toned himself into a more normal state of mind. He came to look upon the epoch through which he was passing

as a purgatorial experience. He hoped to emerge from it in some weeks or months with absolution, even from himself. Then he would see if life still had a supreme joy in store for him. The sense of daily, hourly peril of losing it — that one joy that his soul craved for — was the whip of fire that was to make him worthy of winning it in the long run.

He soon shook off the gloom with which Ruth Freer's forebodings infected him. The truth is he had nerves but no superstition. Within a few days, the net residuum from his talk with her on the mountain road was an enormous relief based on the sort of quit-claim that she had accorded him in parting.

Gerrit Freer's death towards the end of October was only a trifling shock to him. He had never seen Ruth's father, or to be more accurate, had never become aware of his identity. What he knew of him was not calculated to make him regard the old man's exit as an unqualified calamity to Ruth or anybody else. Neither was there anything specially momentous about the event. Freer caught pneumonia and in his whisky decayed state had no resisting power. He died about a week after he took to his bed.

The only special feeling that the incident awakened in Stephen was a sense of the loneliness in which it left the girl despite her father's hard usage of her. It also occurred to him, knowing their poverty, that the sickness and funeral expenses were likely to be an impossible burden upon her and he determined to

take the opportunity of doing something to help her if she would let him. The difficulty was how to go about it. He could not well go to her; he had no idea of starting gossip again. On the other hand, he hardly supposed she would go up to the Clove under the circumstances, at least for a few nights. After thinking it all over, he determined to use Annie Garrett as intermediary. He knew that she was good-natured and he believed that he could influence her to hold her tongue; further, Ruth had spoken more or less kindly of her once or twice; at least they were on as friendly terms as Ruth let anyone in the village hold with her. He stepped down to the Winnesook House the day after Lefferts told him of Freer's death and walked straight into the kitchen, where Mrs. Garrett was ironing her husband's shirts.

"I hear old Freer is dead," said he.

"Good riddance," said Mrs. Garrett with true rustic charity.

"No doubt," said Stephen, "but it's pretty tough on his daughter."

"Tough on Ruthy? Guess she won't think so. Don't you know how he used to lick her?"

"I have heard something of it," said Stephen, coloring under the tan, "but — God knows — she may miss him all the more because he ill-treated her. It's a queer world. But I wasn't thinking of that. What I meant was that it must leave her in a tight place right now. I believe they hadn't a cent to the

good — in debt all the time. I don't see how she's to pay the funeral expenses."

"You seem to be well posted. Whoever gave you your information, it's true enough."

"Oh," said Stephen in his most off-hand way, "Lefferts knows all about them. Well, the point is this; if the girl is in hard straits, I would like to help her. I want to send her some money. I am going to ask you to take it to her; I suppose you must tell her it's from me; I'd rather not, but I see no way to escape it. And"—here there was a brief hesitation—"Mrs. Garrett, I'll ask you as a personal favor to me, never to speak of this to a soul."

"It 'pears to me you take a mighty sight o' interest in Ruthy. Be you really gone on her?"

"I'm not in the least gone on her, Mrs. Garrett; you may take my word for it. But I like her; she interests me. She is unusual and picturesque and I have got considerable enjoyment out of talking with her. Besides"—another brief hesitation—"besides, I believe she had some trouble on my account"—another pause—"which was wholly unwarranted by anything that had ever taken place between us."

"Oh, it's none o' my affair. I only jest couldn't help passing the remark."

"Very well; will you do what I ask?"

"Sure. I'm more'n half inclined to have a hanker for Ruthy, myself, an' I'm glad to oblige you. You've gave us all the trade you could since you come up."

"And you'll say nothing about it?"

"They say a woman can't keep a secret, but you'll find I kin."

Stephen gave her fifty dollars, so great a sum in her eyes, that she at once concluded there was more in the situation than his words conveyed.

"Of course, you'll get her alone," said Stephen, "and you can tell her that if she needs more she's fully welcome to it. She can let me know through you. I'll drop in to-morrow to ask you about it. And for your trouble, you'll let me give you this"—and he extended an additional ten dollar bill.

Mrs. Garrett noisily deprecated any such generous reward for her services but folded up the bill and hid it where there was no possible chance of her husband finding it.

That evening, Stephen and his last pair of guests were enjoying the Indian Summer night and their cigarettes in the pagoda, when he saw a woman's figure enter his grounds at the gap in the fence and approach along the path. The thing was so far from his mind at the moment that he did not recognize Annie Garrett until she came up the steps.

"Oh, Mrs. Garrett, it's you is it?" he said, more than half annoyed.

"Can I speak with you in private a minute, Mr. Eltringham?" she asked.

He apologized to his friends and took her into the dining room, turning up the lamps.

"Here's your money, Mr. Eltringham," she began, holding out the fifty dollar roll.

"Won't you go with it to her?" he interjected sharply.

"I've ben to her," she replied, offended. "When I say as I'll do a thing I do it. I've ben to her an' she won't take it."

"Won't take it? How foolish!"

"So I told her, but it don't make no difference. She's a mule when she makes up her mind an 'tain't no use tryin' to budge her."

"Why wouldn't she take it? Is she spunky about it?"

"No, that ain't it. She sent her thanks. She says she ain't got no need for it. It 'pears she's saved more'n thirty dollars somehow, in years, that she was goin' to buy Marthy Woodbury's organ off her with. Now she says she'll never want it — she talks awful queer; you've no idea of it. But, besides that, they say she owns the house 'n' lot outright, now that the old man's gone, an' she can raise money on it. The Deakin's offered to lend her \$200 on bond'n mortgage ef she'll pay up the account at the store out of it, an' she's goin' to make the loan. I asked her what she was goin' to do with so much money —"

"She's probably going to leave the village," Stephen interrupted.

"No, that ain't it. She says what's left over'll do for her funeral."

"Her what?"

"That's what she says; her funeral. She says she's goin' to die sure. She's growin' fat an' looks well, but there's no budgin' her. She says she's expectin' it 'most any day."

"That's dreadful. She's an awfully morbid girl. Couldn't you rouse her out of her nonsense?"

"No; to hear her talk, you'd think she'd taken the Eltringham curse on her;"—Stephen winced—"and she ain't, I s'pose? She ain't never ben up here acrost the doorstep, has she?"

"No, no, of course not. But what wicked nonsense it is, anyway. Who'd believe that here at the end of the Nineteenth Century any mortal would be influenced by such rubbish?"

"Well, mebbe it is; but you can't get folks up here to look at it that way. You know what's said can't be onsaid an' what's did can't be ondid, an' there you are."

Stephen didn't care to continue the argument. Mrs. Garrett, not without reluctance, stuck out her hand again.

"I brought up the other ten dollars, too," she began.

Mrs. Garrett had a majority of human failings and all the corresponding virtues, including a primitive but compelling love of fair play.

"No, no!" said Stephen. "That's yours."

"Well, you see, she refused—"

"That's nothing. You've done your part and

more. Her position has nothing to do with it. You've earned the money and it's yours."

Stephen was distressed by Ruth Freer's morbid bent towards death. He regarded the curse tradition with mingled ridicule and scorn, but he feared the influence of the fixed idea, busy in an abnormal brain; it was not inconceivable that it might work out its own realization.

Her father's death gave him a good excuse for stopping her publicly in the street and talking with her at some length a day or two after the funeral. She thanked him for the offer of the money.

"You mean well, Stephen," said she. "I've always said so an' I always will."

"It leaves you dreadfully lonely," said he; "I honestly advise you to go away. Sell out or rent your place and start fresh in Wiltwick or somewhere that there's more life than here. What you need is something to occupy your active brain."

"What's the use?" she rejoined. "For the time I've left, it doesn't matter whether it's here or elsewhere; better here so's to be near him"—and she pointed up the Notch.

Stephen protested and argued. He tried to laugh her out of her folly. She was quite cheerful and laughed freely enough; but he couldn't shake her. In the end, her cheerfulness and her laughter renewed his old doubt. How much of it was pose? How much of it was put on to impress him? He left her with the idea that she didn't really believe very much

in the fatality of the curse — just a little — and dwelt on it merely to give herself tragic stature in her own and a few other people's eyes. As they separated, she called him back.

"Thar's one thing I want to say solemn," said she, "I don't blame you for nothin' — for not a thing. No matter what comes out of it — you hear me, no matter what — I don't lay no blame on you an' I don't want you to blame yourself in no way, nohow — no matter what happens; you understand."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, ef I die, you didn't make me go up thar an' take the curse on me. You didn't make me do nothin'. It was all my own way an' I feel as ef it was God's plannin'. I've sort o' seed my life take a shape all this summer. But it waan't your will nohow as pushed things on."

Stephen's last batch of friends left him when November was about a week old and then he was alone. It was this way. He had written early in October to Charley Mayhew, asking him up for the two middle weeks in November, and he had intended that at least a part of the period should be a tête-à-tête. He was greatly attached to Charley and the fresh youthful spirit trying its pinions in the atmosphere of manhood warmed his heart and stimulated his mind. It had been a great disappointment to him when, after a week's delay, he had received a letter declining the invitation. Beyond the disappointment, the letter itself made him uneasy. It was

impossible to tell where the lack lay — the excuse of “real business” was a plausible, probably a true one — but the whole tone of the letter was strained. Of course, Charley was still boyish in composition as in other things. His idea of style seemed to be to write alongside everything he wanted to say and avoid direct statements. The stiffness might be nothing but his desire to be literary. Stephen read the letter over and over and could not decide. But he invited nobody else for the two weeks. He resolved to spend them in working hard, and laying out a decided plan of campaign. He felt that Ruth Freer had virtually freed him from any lien she might have had upon him. The question was whether he felt sufficiently purged of his folly — as he now called it — to grant himself absolution.

Things did not go well with Virginia Seaman after her departure from the mountains with her family. At first, she bore up bravely. The comparative certainty of abandonment, brought home to her by Stephen's New York letter to Charley, had at first aroused her sense of dignity, and she had shown a brighter and firmer exterior than for weeks before. But the vacuity of life, ever before her eyes, gradually tamed her spirit and broke her courage and she fell into a disposition of apathy, strange as it was sad. In the common sense, she was not despondent. She did not weep, she did not shun the world, she did

not lay down her occupations or pursuits. But she lost all cordiality and failed in initiative. When her father suggested anything, she acquiesced. She fell in with all her mother's plans for the tea and other things. She agreed to every proposal gratefully and gently. But there was no enthusiasm; and, as all about her knew that her enthusiasms used to be as easily awakened as the strings of a piano, there was general dismay over her new mood. Her mother, now perceiving that emotions were in play which she had not fathomed, and believing, not altogether erroneously, that her letter was the lamentable origin of her daughter's grief, felt no small remorse and cast around eagerly for a way to undo the mischief. Had Virginia wept and fumed, had she made sentimental speeches about her heart-pain, Mrs. Seaman would have comforted her and thought things were going beautifully. But the state of mind which did not appear to be suffering but rather the demise of joy and hope, equally puzzled and alarmed her. When it came to sending out the invitations for Virginia's tea, she grasped the opportunity to make an overture to fate. Stephen's name was put on the list — quite as a matter of course — and in sending the card Mrs. Seaman in secret went so far as to enclose with it — by way of reparation — a cordial little note, hoping that he would be able to "give them the pleasure of seeing him."

"You're going to send him a card, are you?" re-

marked Charley brusquely when Mrs. Seaman asked him for Stephen's New York address.

"Most assuredly," said Mrs. Seaman.

Charley gave her the number of the studio on West Tenth Street and Mrs. Seaman sent the card herself. She let Virginia know, just casually, that she had done so, and could not help seeing signs of reawakening interest. This was strengthened into something like a return of natural life a few days later, when a note came to Mrs. Seaman from the mountains, in answer to hers, and Stephen said in it that he hoped to put in an appearance and offer his congratulations to Miss Seaman on her entrance into the world. The new change in Virginia deeply impressed her mother.

Stephen Eltringham believed that destiny itself was forcing him into the way he wished to go when the card and Mrs. Seaman's note were forwarded to him at Winnesook. Here, he said to himself, was the absolution he sought, given by the most appropriate hand. The giver might not know the full import of her ministration; but, all the more, he would believe there was a higher power speaking and she was only the medium. Not to palter with such a golden opportunity, he wrote his reply at once and took it to the post office while the impulse was fresh upon him.

Nor had he any fears or hesitations. He settled down to enjoy the next week in ardent work and he

determined to go down a day or two before the date and enjoy himself with Charley, though he might return to the country for a while after the tea in quest of winter studies. He recovered something of his pose with his new hope, and again the thumb and finger of his left hand caressed his moustache as he spoke to the villagers.

It was the following Monday that he got another letter, postmarked in the village and directed in a childlike scrawl. He wondered a little at it but opened it with indifference, assuming that it was a bill from some forgotten tradesman. This is what he read

Stephen pleas meet me to-morow nite on the rode at the Clove at 10 i can go out earlyer now pop is gon i hav something to tell yuo as is good fer yuo to no im awful sorry but you nednt mind i dont want nothin from you only just to tell yuo befor evry on in the village nose it first. Prhapps yuo might want to get away first.

respeckfully

RUTH FREER

i mean Mondy nite if you get this in time if not ill be thare tweysdy to. i must see you.

Stephen's instinct told him what the communication was to be. He returned from the interview raging against fate. Ruth's multiplied assurances that she made no claim on him and would make none only added to his bitterness. Could she, could any mortal see him in such a light as to think that sordid considerations had any place in his estimation of this new and overwhelming calamity? Here he was unfair to

Ruth, for the immunity that she was promising was not the sordid kind; indeed she accepted from him before they parted the money that she had so recently refused. What she was trying to bestow upon him was moral and spiritual release. It may even be said that she was trying to unload him out of her ken. She would have forgotten, if she could, that he was the father of the child that was coming to her, and she strangely hailed the new, quickening life as the seal of her union with the Spirit of the Black Cross Clove.

Stephen in his first mood of reckless defiance proposed to himself to disregard the revelation. He set his teeth and swore to go down to the tea, woo and win Virginia and be happy in the teeth of a malevolent providence. But then he looked ahead. He could not tell the girl in her innocence before marriage; he could not tell the wife in her trust after it. The vista of years of living falsehood arose before him; he saw, too, impending discovery chilling his home with an ever present dread and turning every joy of his love and his life into ashes. No; suicide would be better than the things he could imagine.

Two days before the date of Virginia's fête day he sent cards to her and her mother and to the latter he wrote a short, sad note. He said:

My Dear Mrs. Seaman:

A very dear hope that I nursed of being with you on Thursday cannot be realized. The same trouble from which I suffered at the close of the summer has come upon me again,

more cruelly than ever, and I am incapacitated for all the pleasures of life.

There is no limit to my wishes for your daughter's success and happiness. Will you kindly say to Miss Seaman that I am grief-stricken at not being in a state to wish her joy personally on this important and I hope fortunate occasion, and that always my best wishes will attend her.

With regards to Mr. Seaman and remembrances to all the children, I am,

Faithfully yours,

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM.

He wrote a very brief note to Charley Mayhew, saying that he was in a bad way and probably would not return to the city all winter. Charley rushed to the conclusion that he had consumption — the air cure was just then coming into fashion — and wrote him a remorsefully anxious letter, which Stephen did not answer.

Mrs. Seaman concealed her receipt of Stephen's letter in the first instance. So Virginia entered upon the proceedings of her coming out tea, keyed up with eager expectation. In the hurry and excitement of the occasion itself, she had no time to break down, though the expectancy grew into anxiety and anxiety into dread and dread into crushing certainty as the minutes and hours sped.

When it was all over, she fell back into a chair in a dark corner, where her eyes, full of pain and wonder, stared literally into vacancy out of a pale, wistful face.

Her father, who had some clairvoyance in him, went to her and put his arm about her.

"My little girl is tired," said he.

"Tired of life before it's begun, papa," said she, and she put her head on his shoulder.

There was not a tear and it was the only word of complaint Virginia ever uttered. Later, her mother showed her Stephen's letter and she, too, took up the theory of fatal or at least desperate illness.

"He might have thought enough of me to let me go to him. I would not have been afraid," she thought. Then she reflected that he was probably trying to spare her. She began to teach herself to mourn him as dead, and, so, at least, one thing was, for the present, saved out of the wreck; Virginia's self-respect and her capacity for believing in truth and honor and love remained unwounded.

It would be useless to tell the story of Stephen Eltringham's life during the succeeding month. The reader who likes to revel in misery may go back and read again of his condition after the receipt of Mrs. Seaman's letter and the visit of Ruth Freer to his house. In his present relapse into despair, all the symptoms were intensified according, as the doctors tell us, to the law of human ills. He lived miserably alone, hardly speaking even to his servants. He consumed the day in purposeless walking and driving and in futile toying with work. The night he spent in nightmare sleep, and feverish wakefulness. He offered to release his Japs, but they resolved to

stand by him and produced weird, hairy overcoats and fur caps from the depths of their sailor bags when the first flurry of snow salted the frozen earth.

The cold set in hard and early. The creek sank out of sight amid billows of ice. Nobody could get up into the Notch to see how the waterfalls looked with the fantastic architecture of the winter towering about them. Early in December the snow buried the contours of the entire country deep out of recognition. Then the weather cleared, and crisp, cold sunshine and chilly, yellow fog alternated for weeks.

When the month was well on the wane, Lefferts went to Stephen one day and told him he was going to quit his service. Stephen knew very well why. In his soul he was abjectly humiliated, but he had steeled himself for all that was to come. He manipulated his moustache with the thumb and second finger of his left hand, quite in the old way, as he coolly replied:

“Very well.”

“There’s really nothin’ to do now, sir,” said Lefferts sadly — Stephen had sold his horses immediately after his trip to New York — “and there’s really no reason why I mayn’t go right away. I can’t see as it’ll cause you enny inconvenience.”

“Oh, none at all, Lefferts,” said Stephen. “If you haven’t a job I don’t mind paying you another month’s wages and giving you notice. So then I’ll be discharging you, not you me. But, of course, I

shan't want you for the month. As you say, there's nothing to do and you needn't come around."

"No, thank you, Mr. Eltringham, that wouldn't be fair. I'll go now, ef it's all the same to you"—Stephen had just given him his pay for the elapsed month.

"Suit yourself!"

"I'm very sorry, sir."

"So am I, Lefferts, but it can't be helped, I suppose."

"You see, sir, it seems as ef you told me what wasn't true, sir, about Ruthy."

"You are mistaken, Lefferts; what I told you was entirely true in letter and in spirit. But you hardly imagine I'm going to thresh over the subject with you now."

"No sir, no sir, I never thought on it."

"You can stay if you wish"—Lefferts shook his head.—"If not, good-by and I wish you good luck. If I can recommend you, I shall be glad to do so. Good-by"—and he turned and walked into the house.

Stephen's Christmas was a strange day. The idea struck him shortly before and he gave orders to Haribe and Ikumura as for a gala dinner party. In the morning he walked in the snow as far up the mountain as the Cross Clove and rested his eyes on the forest which looked against the field of snow like a dense pattern of black lace, with jet where the ice

glittered on the branches. After luncheon, he got Garrett's team and a sleigh, and went driving. Returning at dark, he arrayed himself in his evening clothes, the first time he had worn them since the Seamans' dance, and solemnly went in to dinner when Ikumura announced it. By his orders, the room and the table were decked in holly and red berries with scarlet ribbons and covers were set for two.

The courses were served ceremoniously and Stephen had the vacant chair supplied each time as well as himself, even to the champagne, which he drank, English fashion, through the meal. The Japs hardly wondered. They have a morbid streak in them and a genius for the symbolical. One of them hinted that the proceeding was in honor of his father's manes.

"No," said he pleasantly, "I am sacrificing to a departed Goddess — departed out of my life."

He ate his dinner heartily and with great cheerfulness, even laughing when the plum pudding came in with brandy burning about it. One might wonder if he were not mentally unbalanced that day; but who has not his crazy hours and his insane episodes. All through the evening, he carried on — in his imagination — a conversation with his partner across the table.

The day was a success. He felt calmer and more reconciled to life all the next week. But the experiment would not bear repeating. He made no attempt at it when New Year's day approached. He proposed to himself to ignore the holiday altogether.

But fate and his neighbors had something else in store for him.

It was a dull, grey day with a soft layer of snow on top of the crisp foot or so that had been alternately thawing and freezing for weeks. In the afternoon, one could not say that it snowed, but the atmosphere was sprinkled with feathers.

It was three o'clock and Stephen was walking up and down the pagoda, smoking and wondering if he would get any satisfaction out of a tramp or a drive on such a day. Of a sudden he saw Lefferts burst in at the carriage entrance of his grounds and come running top speed towards the house.

"They're coming, sir, they're coming," the man shouted as he approached.

"Who are coming?" asked Stephen in unfeigned, open mouthed astonishment.

"'Most the hull village. They'll be here inside o' five minutes. They're drunk an' crazy."

"The whole village coming here! What in thunder do you mean? Wake up! Are you crazy?"

"No, sir, no, sir. It's to lynch you or ride you on a rail or God knows what. It's all along o' Ruthy Freer. The tavern crowd has got 'em all wrought up an' they're equal to murder. They dassent go after her in her condition, so they're coming up to git squar on you. They talk o' burnin' the house, they do."

"Oh, all right," said Stephen with a chuckling grin indicative of much good humor. "Thank you, Lefferts; thank you with all my heart for the warning.

I'll never forget it. And now I must get ready for them."

"'Course I'll stay by you, Mr. Eltringham."

"Oh, no, why should you? It's no quarrel of yours in all reason. You've done your share."

"I've eat your bread, sir, an' I like you, honest. I couldn't desert you to-day."

"Well, well, this is no time to refuse a man's help. Come in."

Stephen called his Japs and in a word or two told them what was brewing. They grinned, showing their teeth.

"We fight. We not 'fwaid," was what they said.

As the four were making ready in the kitchen, Stephen heard a woman's voice in the front of the house, calling his name. He went to the hallway and found Mrs. Garrett, all out of breath and with a shawl over her head.

"I've kem to tell you," she began, shrieking in her excitement.

"Thank you," said Stephen with a cheerful laugh, "I know all about it."

"They're right here," said she.

"Very well," said Stephen, "you had better get out of the way before the fun begins. Just skip across to the wood and you can get back to the road through the trees without being seen."

"I ain't a-goin'!" said she. "I want to stay and fight with you."

"Good God, Mrs. Garrett, you can't do that —"

But it was too late. The shouts and howls from the road told that the mob had arrived.

"Well," said Stephen, "you stay in here. If we are driven back into the house, you shall fight with us. But I hope things won't go that far."

He stood coolly looking out of the living room window, through the pagoda, at the crowd which, flushed and noisy, came trooping in through the opening in the stone fence and across the broad stretch of snow to the house. There were sixty-five of them, the tavern gang, all the younger, tougher element of the village and vicinity and a dozen or so older men, whose fanaticism was aroused over the outrage on village morals — by a New Yorker. Silas Slocum was one of the loudest. He was always ready to avenge the wrongs of country girlhood on city aggressors — with the usual dislocation of the rustic intellect, he blamed the city woman, who had actually rescued her, for his daughter's misfortune, and thirsted for reprisals. All the total abstinence men were "jagged" with hard cider and patent medicines; the rest were drunk without hypocrisy.

The lack of plan and leadership was shown by the diversity of the objects they carried. One had a rope; another a pot of axle grease and a whitewash brush — it took time and trouble to heat tar — two carried a stout fence rail; Brandt had an armful of pine knots and Horn, who was acting in conjunction with him, swung a plumber's brazier full of lighted coals. All the crowd had clubs or sticks except about

four, who carried shot guns and kept well in the rear.

Andrew Garrett stood outside in the road to watch the proceedings. Deacon Van Camp and Martin Peters, with a crowd of women, went as far as the edge of the copse east of Stephen's place. There they had a fair view without much danger of being compromised in the outbreak, which they deprecated volubly to the women without raising a finger to stop it.

The mob crossed the field of snow from Stephen's fence to the foot of the pagoda in a pretty compact body. The young men stooped and discharged volleys of snowballs as hard as stones at the house; — there were no stones to be had — but the pagoda saved the windows. They howled all the scurrility they could think of at Stephen, inviting him to come out and take his medicine, or words to that effect. Having no plan, they lined up about twenty feet in front of the pagoda and howled some more. A few of the very young ones had tin dishpans — they had the charivari idea — and they banged them vigorously and the shotgun men fired their pieces in the air.

Then the living room door opened wide and Stephen stepped out. He was dressed in topboots, riding breeches and a pea jacket, with a fur cap. In each hand he held a very large-sized revolver.

Right behind him came Lefferts with a revolver tucked under his withered arm and a double-barrelled shotgun in his right hand. The village knew he

could shoot better with one hand than most men could with two.

Then came the two Japs, dragging a shotgun in each hand by the muzzle. Stephen stepped unemotionally to the taffrail of the pagoda. Lefferts took up a position on his right and the two Japs on the left. Lefferts put his revolver on the ledge and poised his gun ready to raise it to his shoulder. The Japs leaned their left hand guns against the fence and brought the others to a ready attitude. Stephen leaned with his knuckles on the ledge, one of his fine black pistols grasped in each hand, in a most disquieting way.

This wasn't in the least what the mob had expected. A majority of them had secretly hoped that Stephen would be away and they had about calculated on breaking his windows, wrecking the shrubs and burning the barn without danger to life or limb or subsequent liberty. When they saw the cheerful preparations that had been made for their reception, they felt that they had been entirely mistaken as to their duty in the premises. They lost their vocations as avengers of wronged virtue in a marvellous hurry. The whole crowd broke and ran and only the brave ones pulled up at a distance of seventy-five feet, while not a few got away altogether, scrambled over the fence and joined Garrett in the road.

Stephen couldn't help it; he laughed outright. The Japs grinned from ear to ear and even Lefferts smiled sadly. Then the mob picked up a little cour-

age. As firing did not begin at once they thought the defenders were afraid and stole forward step by step, shouting, cursing, villifying and beating the tin pans as if they were Stephen. The defenders stood motionless. The scene lasted five minutes. Stephen grew tired of it; he was thinking of trying to scare them away outright by a volley in the air, when Slocum, who had lashed himself into a blind frenzy, grabbed a shotgun from the hand of another man and dashing forward, aimed it at Stephen. Instantly the two Japs and Lefferts covered him, but Stephen rapped out sharply: "Steady! Put down your arms; I'll deal with him."

The men lowered their pieces and Stephen, pointing a pistol at Slocum, shouted, "Get back or I'll put a bullet into you."

But Slocum was too crazy to heed. He pulled both triggers before Stephen could fire — the whole incident barely lasted a second — and both snapped harmlessly. The man from whom he had snatched the gun had fired it in the opening salute and had not taken the trouble to reload.

Stephen dropped his hand, again laughing, but Slocum burst into tears, and hurling the gun from him dashed back through the crowd and threw himself face down in the snow. He had to pay five dollars to the owner for straightening the barrel the next day.

Meanwhile, another figure emerged from the crowd. This was the young giant who had been jiu-jitsued

by Haribe on the day of the piano's arrival. He was now reckless with liquor and he advanced to within twenty-five feet of the pagoda, calling Stephen every filthy thing that he had ever heard mentioned. He wound up by telling him he was a coward, who got other men to defend him with deadly weapons against unarmed men, that he was afraid to face men himself because he knew what he deserved from them.

"Well, I'm not afraid of you, anyway," said Stephen sharply.

He laid down both his pistols on the ledge in front of him; he was at the pagoda steps before Lefferts could stop him, and, stepping down, he walked towards the big fellow at a brisk pace. The man, quite astonished, began to fall back.

"Oh, wait for me," said Stephen, "you're not afraid, you know. I have no arms. If you run, I'll have to help you with a few kicks."

The prospect of being kicked before the crowd halted the fellow. A foot or two from him, Stephen, who had lots of gymnasium experience, put up his hands in orthodox style. He had on a pair of leather riding gloves. Seeing there was no help for it, the village brave put up his great bare fists like truncated hams. Relying on his brute strength, he proposed to rush the game. He sparred a second, then made a fierce lunge with his right at Stephen's face, instantly followed by a desperate upward jolt with his left, intended for the region of the stomach. Stephen side-stepped the right lunge, beat down the left jolt with

his own left, and with a terrible upward swing of his right arm caught his adversary under the point of the chin.

The man straightened to his full height like a spring stiletto, poised on his heels a second, threw his arms over his head, staggered back a step or two and collapsed in a snow bank. Stephen stepped to him, determined to knock him down again the instant he recovered. But the fellow made no effort to get up. He was all but insensible; he rolled his head feebly from side to side and a moaning or whimpering sound came from his lips.

A hush came over the crowd. They quailed as Stephen stood over the man and swept them with his eye. The anger, that he could so well control, now burned hot in him. His brows were gathered in deep wrinkles. His eyes blazed. The end of his nose was pinched. He looked capable of bloodshed on easy provocation.

"Now, see here, you damned boors and scoundrels," he ejaculated in a voice that had a hard Scotch edge to it, "I give you two minutes to get off my place. Come and pick up your carrion and if there's one of you on my land a second longer than it takes him to get off it, I and my men will open fire on the whole crew of you at once. So get out!"

He turned and walked back to the pagoda. The crowd picked up their twice defeated champion and hurried him, crying and sobbing like a baby, to the road. Stephen and his defenders went into the house

without waiting for the mob to disappear, and shut the door.

Within, Stephen was as debonair as if he had just been playing tennis. He thanked Haribe and Ikumura cordially and promised to make substantial recognition of their courage and fidelity at the right time.

"Aw, we not 'fwaid, we fight," said Haribe.

"We fight," echoed Ikumura, and the two gathered up the arms and waddled off with them.

"I won't talk of any reward for you, Lefferts," Stephen went on. "I know you wouldn't like it. But I'll remember to-day to the day of my death."

He offered his hand and Lefferts took it, brushing his coat sleeve across his eyes.

He turned to Mrs. Garrett, who stood drinking in every word and gesture with shining eyes.

"And you, Mrs. Garrett," said he, "you're a brave woman and a good friend. When I go to New York again, I'll send you something to remember to-day by."

He held out his hand to her, too. She took it in both hers, and raised it to her lips fervently.

"You're a man!" said she, and, muffling her face in her shawl, she ran out of the house and down to the now empty road.

The mob had another experience before it disbanded.

Ruth Freer had paid no attention to the crowd as it passed her house yelling. She thought it was off

for a turkey shoot or some such pastime. The words she caught from the Babel of noise did not encourage her to go to the window.

But as the crowd broke before Stephen's wrath and started back for the village, the bright idea occurred to a young girl to run ahead and tell Ruth. To heighten the effect, she simply announced that "the boys had ben up ridin' Mr. Damnfine on a rail."

Ruth asked a quick question or two; she dashed into her bedroom, she dashed out, hiding something in the folds of her dress; she bolted out of the door, and, reaching the village street just in time to meet the discomfited mob with the wailing bully in the front rank, she opened fire without word of warning or an instant's delay with the revolver that Stephen had lent her, emptying the five loaded chambers as fast as she could pull the trigger.

Fortunately the crowd was still out of range, but it unanimously broke and ran, men and women falling over each other. When they stopped and turned, they saw Ruth deliberately open the weapon, throw out the cartridges and proceed to reload it. Keen ears among them caught some of the awful things she was shrieking in her high, shrill treble. Ruth Freer had not listened to her father's flow of profanity and filth for more than twenty-three years without becoming an expert.

When the revolver was loaded she started running at the crowd, and they ran away from her, scattering into the copse on one side of the road and behind the

houses on the other. She held her fire, trying to get near enough to someone to do real mischief. God knows what would have happened had not Mrs. Garrett, who had reached the verandah of the Winnesook House by this time, run out and caught her, shaken the pistol out of her hand, secured it and held on to her, screaming:

"You darned fool, do you want to do yourself a hurt? Do you want to kill yourself?"

"I don't care," screamed Ruth, "what for do they go an' hurt him? What affair is it o' theirs, anyhow?"

"You darned fool," said Mrs. Garrett, "he's a match for the hull crew an' as many more. He's beat 'em off like dogs. Come home an' I'll tell you about it."

The next morning, Stephen walked through the village alone and unarmed. He returned indifferently the sheepish nod of Van Camp and the surly one of Martin Peters. He ignored the scowls of some of the others.

After luncheon, he walked down again. He stopped at Garrett's and ordered his team for three o'clock. He went a few houses farther on to Ruth Freer's. He knocked, went in when she answered and closed the door behind him. She was sitting by the stove brooding. He sat down beside her, and took her hand.

"Ruth," said he, "I want you to get a few things together and come with me. I've ordered Garrett's

team and the sleigh; it'll be ready in an hour or so. We'll go down to Wiltwick and be married, and we'll come back home in a day or two. You needn't take much. We will buy a proper outfit down there."

She looked at him dreamily, but showed no brightening.

"You mean well, Stephen," said she, "but it ain't no use."

"Now, no nonsense, Ruth; we won't have any crazy talk. It's got to be. It should have been long ago. I am ashamed to the dust, Ruth, that it has taken me so long to see what's right, and square and decent. But I see clearly now and I will do what's right. You will never repent it, Ruth. I will try to give you all that you wish."

"You mean well, Stephen, but it ain't no use."

"But Ruth —"

"No use talkin', Stephen. I won't leave here; I won't marry you. I won't have no more to do with you —'cept in a friendly way, of course. An' that's the end of it."

"But our child —"

"'Tain't yours."

"Not mine?" gasped Stephen starting to his feet; "then for God's sake why did you say it was? Whose is it?"

"It's his as I love," she replied, standing up, too, and her voice sounded full and musical. "It's his as is up in yon mount'n, waitin' fer me to free him. It's true it's yours in the way you mean; but it ain't,

really. It's his an' mine, an' you'll see it'll be like an Indeen."

"Why, you must be mad, Ruth —"

"Tell you what I'll do: Look me square in the eye, Stephen Eltringham; say that you love me; say you love only me; say it with your heart as well's your smooth tongue — an' I'll marry you."

She leaned forward, boring with her eyes into his. His dropped before her. He wet his lips and began:

"I'll be a good husband —"

"Bah! I'll never marry you nor no man. You mean all right, but go off to your fine ladies on the hill. I know you."

CHAPTER XVII

WHEREIN RUTH FREER ATTAINS THE DESIRE OF HER LIFE

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM could not help looking upon Ruth Freer's refusal to marry him as a relief, but he never took it for a license to marry Virginia Seaman. That situation was beyond the revival of hope.

He took a night to think and plan. In the morning, he began preparations for departure from Winesook. While Haribe and Ikumura dismantled the house and packed trunks, he went down to the village. He arranged with Garrett for teams to take himself, the Japs and his luggage to Wiltwick. Then he went in to see Ruth Freer and forced upon her a considerable sum of money for her support and expenses until the spring. He assured her that he would then return to provide for her future. She smiled wanly at this.

He had a long talk with Lefferts, in which he put the relation of master and servant aside. At its close Lefferts consented to become his man again and take up quarters in the old Eltringham house as caretaker and special agent to watch over Ruth's welfare.

Stephen's final visit was to Mrs. Garrett. He engaged her at liberal pay — Winnesook gauge — to act as daily companion, nurse and protector to the girl. He had spoken of this to Ruth and she had consented. Mrs. Garrett was nothing loath; the money was badly needed and the easy, talkative job just suited her.

Then Stephen went away. His mind was not so taken up with his own bitter sorrow that he had not a tear in his heart for the misguided, craving, aspiring soul that had brought ruin to him and whose ruin he had been. Fortunately his mind was so bent on the tragedy of the time current that it neglected to recall the day of mirth and hope when he had first set foot in Winnesook.

And now for the two women, Ruth Freer and Annie Garrett, patient and nurse, there began that long period of waiting which ordinarily means to women the perfection of bliss or the extremity of despair. There is nothing in life more marvellous than that such contrasts of joy and anguish, pride and shame should be identified with the same natural function. Is it not characteristic that while the function is a Divine ordinance, its aspects of misery are of human contrivance?

In Ruth Freer's months of probation, neither joy nor pain seemed to have its common sway. Hers was a case as if by itself. The approach of motherhood awoke no warmth, no tenderness in her soul absorbed in the expectation of death. But, on the other hand,

the human shame that had stricken her in the early days of her fall from grace had passed away leaving her indifferent to the opinions of men and fearless in the presence of the vague Deity with whom her intuitions provided her. She was possessed with the idea now that she was a part of the machinery of fate moving towards the accomplishment of a high and beautiful destiny. All intervening experiences seemed mere irksome details.

The women, a little shy of each other at first, came gradually together. Ruth was not accustomed to kindness and even payment could not prevent Mrs. Garrett from being kindly. Besides, Ruth as supposedly the beloved of Stephen Eltringham, was clothed with dignity and importance in her eyes, strangely unmingled with jealousy.

As they became intimate, Mrs. Garrett angled for bits of the story, from which she counted on piecing it out to completion in the course of time. To her surprise, she found Ruth willing to speak with the utmost freedom and detail of her relations with Stephen.

Of course, Mrs. Garrett didn't believe a word of the narrative the first time she heard it. Who would have believed it on the faith of Ruth's mere statement? But as they went over the ground, day after day, explaining and detailing, picking and patching, she at last accepted the truth with bewilderment. Stupefying as the story was in its unlikeness to anything in life that she knew or could feel, what she

called its romance fascinated her. She demanded a happy ending and she started to argue Ruth into acceptance of one.

"He'll marry you when he comes back," she said.

"Don't I tell you he wanted to — or at least he was willin' to — an' I wouldn't have him?" said Ruth.

"I can't understand you. Ef a man treated me like that, I'd follow him to the ends o' the earth an' make him marry me"—her eyes blazed as she said it. Not a doubt she would have done so!

"Why should I? I ain't got no claim on him," Ruth replied. "He never came after me. He never made love to me or deceived me in no way, nohow. It was me as allus went after him."

"But ef you cared for him enough to go after him like that, gracious sakes, why didn't you take him when you got the chance?"

"I tell you, I didn't care for him. All I wanted was to git out o' here an' I was willin' to do a'most anything for that. I thought at first as I could twist him aroun' me finger an' make him take me to New York. It was me as was eggin' him on. I was goin' as far's I dast all the time an' he was chillin' me down an' holdin' me off with that way o' his until I found out what sot ideas he had; 'n' then I knew it was no use ef I couldn't ketch him in some way."

Ruth exaggerated in retrospect. Her conduct had as a rule been rather impulsive than deliberate.

"But when you did ketch him, why didn't you hold on to him?" commented Annie Garrett.

"What's the use when I'm goin' to die?"

"You still think o' that?"

"Why, don't you know I've took the curse on me?"

"Well, mebbe you've broke his heart now. Ef he asked you to marry him, you didn't have no right to refuse."

"Break his heart, you fool woman! Why, he didn't care enough for me to take me when he could 'a' had me for puttin' out his finger. He only wanted to marry me to do what's right. A kind o' fit came over him to do the square thing. But ef I'd 'a' married him, he'd 'a' never took me away from here 's long 's we lived. He'd 'a' ben ashamed o' me an' he'd 'a' hid away from all his friends till one of us died. I'll tell you the truth, Annie, I b'lieve he's stuck on some o' your grand city ladies up on the hill. Mebbe it's that baby-faced Seaman girl. They was around him a lot. She'd just suit him, too — dressed fine, an' grand in her ways. I hope he'll marry her when I'm dead. I ain't got nothin' agin him — quite the opposite; I like him well enough, though I don't love him nohow. I love no one but Winnesook."

Virginia Seaman's parents did everything in their power to divert her mind from her sorrow and its cause. All the gaities of Brooklyn, with occasional plunges into Manhattan, filled up her days and evenings. She made no resistance; she felt the danger of

giving way to morbid excess of suffering. She fought against it, fought against herself, as she would have done had Stephen been really dead. It could not be said that she presented an exterior of mourning. Those who did not know her well took her for a quiet, rather serious, very gentle girl who seemed neither specially interested nor interesting. But, of course, those near to her realized the change, and a very bitter feeling grew up against Stephen Eltringham.

This was at first Virginia's greatest trial — enduring this hostility to the man she loved. After an effort or two, she ceased to combat it. The family, seeing how it hurt her, tried to keep the subject in the background. But Stephen's name would occasionally come up. Her cousin asked about him; Kate experimented until her mother suppressed her; there were accidental references. At such times she always saw the shake of her mother's head — Mrs. Seaman had to all intents and purposes forgotten her own share in the business and blamed it all on Stephen — the hardening of her father's face or the open anger in Charley Mayhew's. The whole dreadful puzzle would sweep through her brain, she would revive every detail in her memory, analyze, analyze, analyze to the dregs. The result was always the same; against all reason, she loved Stephen Eltringham more and more every time she lived over again the mystery of his wooing and his desertion of her.

There were developments during the winter that

might have sapped the foundation of a less ingenuous faith than hers. But though they gave her new torture and exhausted her capacity for wonder, she held out against them.

She kept eager watch for any stray tidings of Stephen that might be blown her way. She read the art notes and notices in the newspapers for mentions of his name and, for the first time in a couple of years, found none. One day she went into a Fifth Avenue art store, through which she knew Stephen had sold pictures. She bought an etching for a birthday present for her father, and casually asked the salesman if he had any new water colors by Mr. Eltringham.

"No," said the man, "not a thing this year. I guess he's given up painting. They say he came into a fortune recently, some old family estate up in the country, and I suppose he's going in for society altogether now. Money always spoiled him. He never worked half hard enough and now it seems he's just going the pace. At least I judge so from this; maybe you'd like to see it."

The man showed her a paragraph in a shady weekly paper which made a specialty of the doings of society people. It said:

Young Stephen Eltringham, who dabbled in art for several years, seems to have abandoned the hopeless undertaking of becoming court painter to the Four Hundred. The rumors that he inherited an ancestral seat up the State are all moonshine. From what we can learn, the place is a stone quarry with a small farm annex. It is said the heir gave up painting for

farming all last summer with considerable damage to his pocketbook. This winter he appears to be going in for what our daily contemporaries call the "gay social whirl," and bets are even that his plan is to recoup by means of a good marriage. There are plenty of heiresses who would be glad to buy him, no doubt, for his showy figure and his old New York name. Rumor links him with no one in particular as yet but he has been spending week-ends etc., etc.

Virginia kept her head and thanked the man without betraying herself. But really it hurt her very much.

"Did you know Stephen was in the city?" she asked Charley Mayhew; they had come to call him by his first name between themselves.

"Yes," said Charley, "some of the fellows told me he was here. He hasn't come to see me or written me or made a sign. I don't understand it unless he's ashamed — as he certainly should be."

"Is he very wild, Charley?"

"Stephen wild? Nonsense! You know him better."

"Well, I heard a man — a stranger — say the other day, quite accidentally — he didn't know that I knew Mr. Eltringham — he said that he was going the pace. What did he mean by that?"

"I guess he didn't know what he was talking about."

"He said Stephen had thrown over painting for society."

"Oh, yes, I see what he meant now. So the fellows tell me. They say that Stephen has quite given

up all his bohemian ways. He's going to dinners and dances and the opera and things, goes out of town every Friday or Saturday to week-ends — the regular society racket, you know. I guess that's the reason I never run across him. When he goes in for that sort of thing he flies too high for me."

"He doesn't seem to be in bad health?"

"No. I hear he's all right, only getting gray already. Genia, I never took much stock in the idea that Stephen was in the way to die young. Only the good do that, you know, and Stephen's no angel in the what-do-you-call-it stage, the thing the butterfly goes through. One of two things: Either he's had some heavy trouble that we don't know and that maybe he's too proud to tell, or else he's a bad lot."

"It isn't that, I'm sure."

"Well, maybe he's lost his money; though it doesn't look like it, the way he's living."

"If it was that, how mean it would be to think that another person would care whether he lost it or not. But it can't be that. It costs a lot to go around with the Four Hundred, doesn't it? I know we can't do it. That's why we live in Brooklyn."

And so the puzzle continued. Virginia now turned to the society columns and items in the daily papers for mentions of Stephen's name. She saw that he dined at the house of a very great lady — American standard — and appeared in her box at the opera. He went to Tuxedo over Sunday, he rode at Meadowbrook. He even led the cotillion at a dance — not a

very important one — in New York. On a driving trip to the mountains of North Carolina he won encomiums for his courage in a runaway accident, saving the party from disaster by some act of readiness and daring which the papers chose to speak of as heroic — with very bad pictures of him.

The information which Virginia collected in this fragmentary way, indicated Stephen's life during the winter fairly well. The first week or two after his arrival in New York from Winnesook, he had tried dissipation and work. Trixie Joliette came out of it with a new diamond sunburst. Finding nothing, however, but disgust in either work or dissipation, he accepted an invitation from a family friend to a country place, and then others that resulted from it. To a man with Stephen's capability of amusing, these were at once numerous. Before the end of January he had all his dates full.

He didn't enjoy it, but it was a refuge from thought. Stephen was in that frame of mind when men flee for relief from the realities of life to some form of triviality. A Frenchman would have taken up baccarat as a counter-irritant; a German would have shot himself as if we could escape our responsibilities by dying; an Englishman would have gone to the Congo after big game, with a fair sense of the comfort that is to be found in nature and isolation; a Spaniard or an Italian might have taken refuge in the cloister, most cowardly flight of all; Stephen went into Society. A usual American would prob-

ably have hurled himself simultaneously into the arena of money making — more great fortunes are due to disasters of the heart and senses than anyone dreams of; — but Stephen wasn't usual. Though something of a derelict, he was still an artist in soul and he preferred laughing with and at his fellow men to fleecing them.

Three, nearly four long months he spent this way. His bad days were those on which he got letters from Lefferts. These were bald and trite; what the countryman felt and observed, he had no gift to convey in writing. But in the brief, dry lines Stephen could see it all. Ruth remained the same. She was fairly cheerful. She never showed fear or repining, but she was sure she was going to die. Now she associated the event in some way with the birth of her child.

The Methodist minister from Cross Roads had called upon her and tried to induce her to make public confession of sin and seek redemption in repentance. She placidly told him of her expectation of soon joining Winnesook, the Demon of the Black Cross Clove, and of haunting the mountains, a disembodied spirit, as his spouse. The good gentleman lacked imagination. Apart from the conventions of his church, which were a habit, not a faith, in him, he lacked sense of the supernatural. He concluded that Ruth was insane and tried to stir up the Poormaster to have her committed to an asylum. That thrifty of-

ficial, however, told him bluntly that if every woman in the countryside who was a bit crazy were made a public charge, the town would be bankrupt. And so the matter was dropped.

One afternoon, Stephen received this telegram:

WILTWICK, April 23.

To Stephen Eltringham, New York.

Girl. All well.

L. LEFFERTS.

The instinct of paternity awoke in him fulminantly. The joy of the bringing into the world the new life so sacred in its casket of human helplessness steals softly over the mother's heart; it pervades her whole being by slow stages with expectancy of bliss. To the father, it comes at last as the realization of the incredible. Stephen in particular had been so absorbed in contemplation of the tragedy of his own and Ruth's situation that it had never occurred to him that the advent into the present of the little wanderer from the mists of the eternal past could give him the slightest thrill. But now that he knew it had come; when he thought of it as a thing of flesh and blood, with all the struggle and trial of life awaiting it, not only his spirit but his very flesh yearned for the sight of its rolling eyes and the touch of its jelly fingers.

He hunted up time tables in a flustered way, and bitterly repined when he found that by no possible combination could he reach Winnesook that night.

Then he gave the great lady, who had taken him up, a jar — as the vernacular hath it — by sending her a lame excuse for cutting loose from her theatre party that evening.

At first, it was his plan to start up the river by a night train and drive over from Wiltwick in the morning. But as the afternoon waned, he thought of the unpleasantness and the difficulties that might result and he grew shy. He saw himself stared at, ridiculed, perhaps openly insulted by the villagers. Ruth's reception of him, too, was problematical. If her weird dreams still held her in their grip, she might deny his paternity, refuse him access to the child and put him in an absurd and scandalous position.

He stifled his longings and resolved to await developments. He wrote a letter to Lefferts telling him to see that everything possible was done for Ruth and her baby; to get a doctor from Wiltwick, if necessary, to back up the one from Halestown. He sat down to wait as patiently as he could for news, and only a "doing well" bulletin arrived in the first week. Then, in the middle of the night, he received this telegram:

WILTWICK, April 29.

To Stephen Eltringham, New York.

Ruth very bad. Doctors is badly scared. She is out of her head raving. Has to be held down by four women. She talks of you and Indian. You better come up, maybe, if you want to see her alive. Am waiting here for reply.

L. LEFFERTS.

Stephen wrote an answer and gave it to the telegraph messenger to be forwarded at once.

"I suppose you've no news," was his greeting as he raced out of the Wiltwick ferry house at noon the next day, and clambered upon the buckboard in which Lefferts sat behind two strong horses.

"Yes," answered Lefferts; "I've heard this mornin'. Enos Fairweather's ben down for some freight. She was crazy all night talkin' about the Indeen. She wanted to git out o' bed an' go up int' the Notch. They've got the sheets all fastened down now so's she can't get out easy. She's made a fine recovery, only she's out of her head. She's that strong you wouldn't believe it. The doctor — Jardine, from Halestown — says she'll have to be sent to the County Asylum for some whiles, anyhow."

Stephen cursed under his breath; and asked after a pause:

"How about the child?"

"It's a fine little girl, sir, doin' well. Annie Garrett's takin' care of it."

All this time they were climbing the steep road that leads from the river bank to the town of Wiltwick. At the local railway station they stopped, and bought ready-made sandwiches. Lefferts refused any; he had eaten, but Stephen ate his share as they drove inland over the hilly, stony roads. They were the first food, practically, he had had that day. Then he hauled out his pocket flask and

mixed whisky and water at a farmhouse wellside and drank it.

The horses could not make more than three miles an hour. The road rose a hundred feet to the mile. Where it was not a jumble of loose stones, it was a quagmire.

The atmosphere was saturated with discomfort. It had rained all night, and the air was gray with moisture. The mountains ahead were hidden in mist. It was warm enough for June.

It began to rain again. Stephen put on his light rubber coat which he had over his arm and Lefferts buttoned up his great overcoat about his neck. A rapid, vicious shower splashed down upon them, the first of a series that punctuated the afternoon. The horses would only walk in the rain, with their noses to the ground. The two men sat perspiring and gloomy — in physical misery and mental distress. Lefferts chewed tobacco and urged the horses a little. It kept Stephen busy to hold himself in — to suppress utterance of what he felt and suffered.

There were no telegraph posts to count along that road, but Stephen watched the trees and fields and houses. They seemed to mock him. He could hardly believe that they were not moving, too, stealing away ahead and dragging out the road in their wake. As the minutes that were like hours lengthened into hours that were like days, he lost all sense of time and distance. The lowering sky aided the

illusion and he thought it must be near nightfall when they came in sight of the Methodist Church at Cross Roads. It was only three o'clock, however.

From that point on through Winnesook and past his own place to where the Notch began, the road was comparatively level and in better condition. In seven or eight minutes more, they were crossing the bridge by the sawmill, with the creek raving and raging in its bed below them. Rounding a curve in the road, they could see down to the end of the village. It had stopped raining for the minute, and they saw a group of ten or a dozen figures a good way down, standing in the middle of the way. Lefferts whipped up the horses. As they cantered up the street, Stephen saw that the knot of men and women were in front of Ruth Freer's house.

"Can she be dead?" he thought.

Standing up on the buckboard, he jumped to the earth in the instant that Lefferts drew rein. Annie Garrett ran to him as the others opened out of the horses' way. His and her words streamed out simultaneously, so that it was half a minute before he understood.

"How is she? Is she better? What does the doctor say? Can't I see him? Where is he?"—these were his questions.

"She's gone! She's run off. She's got away an' we don't know where she is. The men is out lookin' for her!" was what Mrs. Garrett shrieked.

"Gone!" shouted Stephen at last, when he came to understand. "Gone where? Have you no trace?"

"A man as kem down the Notch road says he thought he seen a woman up in the woods 'crost the valley, but he didn't b'lieve it possible. He concluded it was a patch o' snow as hadn't melted. But I shouldn't wonder but what she'd go there. She was ravin' 'bout the Cross Clove somethin' awful all last night."

Stephen turned and looked a horror-stricken look at Lefferts. Lefferts nodded.

"How long ago since she got away? How did it happen?" Stephen demanded.

"'Bout noon, I guess. I just run down to see that dinner was right for Andy. I left old Mrs. Horn in charge of her, tellin' her to shout for help ef she needed it. But it 'pears Ruthy was so quiet an' peaceful like — seemin'ly asleep — that the old woman thought she'd take a run home, too, an' when she got back Ruthy was gone.

"She must ha' ben layin' fer a chanst. She took all the bastin' that was holdin' her nightgown to the bed out. She put on her shoes an' stockin's an' a skirt an' a shawl about her; leastways I guess she did, fer we can't find 'em.

"Nobody seen her in the street, fer it was just dinner hour."

"We must get after her at once," said Stephen to Lefferts.

"Sure," said Lefferts. Then the dreamer became the man of action. Leaning over to Mrs. Garrett, he said sharply and impressively:

"When the men come back — they'll never find her — tell them to make a kind o' bed or git a hammick up to the store to carry her in. Then tell 'em to git acrost the creek an' folly up the old wood road on the south mount'n. Tell 'em to holler when they git near the Crost Clove, fer that's where she is an' we'll be there with her ef we kin find her." By way of afterthought, he added, "Send someone up the road to take care o' the team. I'll hitch it where we go into the glen. Jump in, Mr. Eltringham."

As Stephen did so, he paused on the step. Turning to Annie Garrett, he said:

"And the child?"

"She's well, Mr. Eltringham. I have her. She's all right."

As they reached the Eltringham place, Lefferts turned in at the driveway.

"Shan't we go on?" Stephen asked hastily.

"In them shoes?" said Lefferts.

It took only a few minutes for Stephen to put on his high top boots, outside his trousers. He changed his coat and waistcoat for a dark blue sweater.

Lefferts changed his overcoat for a pea-jacket. He hastily packed a small knapsack with food, thrusting Stephen's flask, still nearly full, into it. He ran up to the stable and got a length of rope, which he coiled up. At the last moment he picked

up Stephen's rubber rain coat and, folding it, strapped it along with the rope to the knapsack.

They drove a quarter of a mile up the road to the entrance to the Notch. There was a lad already waiting to take charge of the horses. Lefferts told him hurriedly to take them to Garrett's. The two men entered at a farm gate. They passed the house, crossed fields and fences and plunged into a thin growth of young saplings all over which the buds were just swelling. Stephen could catch the blurred furrows of wheels to the right and left and knew they were following an old wood or quarry road.

"How will we cross the creek?" he asked as he heard it blustering and threatening below.

"At the high rocks," said Lefferts. "They're never covered."

"Do you think she came this way?"

"No, I'm sure she didn't. She crossed over by Marthy Woodbury's and struck into the old South Mount'n trail. She allus went that way. It's the fairest walkin'."

"Why didn't we follow her, then?"

"We never could overtake her. She's crazy strong an' she'll travel swift. She's had three hours' start. This way's more'n a mile shorter."

It was spirit breaking toil, walking in such vapor bath weather. Sweat soaked their garments. The wet branches lashed their faces and necks with drops of water. Every now and then, a pine or fir showered them with spray as they brushed past. Then

it rained blindingly and they had to halt under a sheltering rock until the air cleared so that they could see ahead. The soil stuck to their shoes until the soles weighed like lead under their feet. They slipped in the saturated earth and they stumbled over half hidden stones as the water blinded their eyes.

After a long half hour, they reached a shelf beyond which farther progress seemed impossible. It looked out over one of the great pools that lie at the base of every waterfall. Lefferts peered over the brink and seemed satisfied. Gripping a branch he dropped to a ledge a little lower. With his back to the rock, he sidled along ten feet, caught a young tree that clung to the crag and lowered himself a couple of feet more. Zigzagging to and fro he found steps by which he continued to descend until Stephen could only see the top of his hat. Then after a moment's pause the hat disappeared, and Stephen heard the flop and fizz of his rubber-soled shoes as he landed on a rock somewhere out of sight below.

"It's all right; can you follow?" his voice came from the depth.

Stephen started instantly. It was a scary task. Every movement meant the possibility of broken neck or limbs. He was cool and agile but not an experienced climber.

The last step in the descent landed him on a pretty broad projecting bay of rock. Eight feet below

there was a boulder as big as a room in a great city house. Its wet top slanted at a treacherous angle, and all about the great stone, only ten feet below its apex, the creek swirled and swept along in tumultuous cold grey swells, creased and seamed with ropes of foam. Its fierce, guttural voice was almost lost in the roar of the cataract on the other side of the pool, where a torrent reaching from edge to edge of the channel hurled itself unceasingly from a hundred feet above into the heaving, struggling waters of the basin.

Lefferts was standing on the great rock, and Stephen without waiting to calculate the danger leaped to his side. Lefferts caught him and helped him to get foothold. Then there was a five-foot leap to another great rock a little lower in level. This was not difficult, though the furious intervening race of water made it terrifying. On the outer edge of the second rock, they lowered themselves into the shallow overflow of the creek which came nearly to the tops of their boots. Then they scrambled up the slope of the mountain for hundreds of feet, the ground giving way under them at every step as if it would hurl them back into the valley, until at last they landed again on the half obliterated track of one of the old wood cutters' roads.

"It's easy now," said Lefferts as he led the way further towards the heart of the glen, which the criss-cross of the still naked branches hid from their view.

"She's ben here. I knowed it," he remarked in a minute or two as he pointed to broken twigs.

Then they caught her footprints where the slimy ground had given way under her shoes.

They hurried on. From time to time they caught other traces of her passage. She often slipped and once they found a rag of her skirt upon a dead briar.

It was close to five o'clock when the air darkened. They were under the shadow of a cliff which leaned forward. Stephen recognized the place. They were just approaching the entrance to the Black Cross Clove. There was still a considerable mass of snow between the cliff and the wood where the sunlight seldom struck. The rain had softened it to gritty slush and the track of Ruth Freer's footsteps was plain across it.

The floor of the Black Cross Clove was still covered with hard ice, hiding the dreadful stones that looked like drowned corpses. An inch of water flowed over this from the drip from above and the seepage from the walls. An inky cloud rolled up from the plains and covered the sky and, as they entered, a flash of lightning lit up the weird place and a roll of thunder, far, far above, shook the atmosphere. They fairly crawled over the icy path, steadying themselves by touching the left wall as they advanced, until they were able to climb upon the rock shelf. Then they went faster, taking every chance, for the insane girl's footprints led them on

and they saw blood prints on the saplings that she grasped, showing that she had hurt herself.

Stephen was first at the leaping place at the entrance of the corridor that led to the Pit of Tophet. He made the leap blindly and lost his footing and had to scramble on hands and knees to escape falling to the icy floor of the gully. In the moment that he leaped, a sound had pierced his ear that all but stopped his heart. It was that voice he knew so well, sweet but trivial, singing the song that had haunted him for months, that gay unmeaning little ditty, which now seemed to mock at the drama whose accompaniment it had been, to mock at life itself and to fling back a wanton defiance to the surrounding menace of death.

Lefferts leaped to Stephen's aid, but he regained his footing in an instant. They pushed on past the niches over the shelf of shale, temporarily broadened through the havoc wrought by the winter in the rock.

As they reached the Pit of Tophet they saw her—away at the other side, standing in Satan's Pulpit, clad only in one long garment of white and waving her arms above her head as she sang and laughed in glee.

"Ruth, Ruth! Come back! Come out! Come around and meet us!" shouted Stephen.

"Aha," she shrieked, "you've come to me weddin'! See the bride all in white"—and she held out her draperies on each side as if they were a ball dress.

"He's down there still; he ain't come up yet; but he will in a minit. He's comin', he's comin'. Winnesoo-oo-ook! Winnesoo-oo-oo-ook!"

And she began singing again and dancing her unfit dance with maniac shrieks of laughter which rang out over the rush of the wind and pierced through the terrible roll of the thunder.

The men had stood horror bound. As they stared at her, a veil seemed suddenly to cut her off from their sight in the glowering twilight. Stephen instinctively looked up and saw a thin slice of sand and pebbles detach itself from all along the opposite ledge of the chasm. As the sand fell it again formed a screen or veil between them and the girl.

"We must hurry to her," he muttered.

They started. They had gone two steps along the rock ledge when Lefferts shrieked, and his voice pierced the ear like the cry of a wounded wild animal:

"The mount'n! The mount'n! The mount'n's a fallin' down! It's the end o' the world!"

In that instant, as Stephen looked up, it seemed true. The whole mass of earth and rock and wood above the cornice of brown shale was in motion. The next second, it was pouring down, crashing, rushing, roaring, into the space before them.

Stephen dashed forward on the path towards Ruth. A stone hit him on the head and knocked him senseless.

Lefferts seized him by the collar of all his clothes at the risk of strangling him, and dragged him back along the ledge.

It was only ten feet but stones and clumps of earth battered the rocks all around. Fragments struck them like hailstones and sand lashed them as if driven from a blast.

Fortunately for them, the landslide was only pouring over the edge of the cliff as yet; it had not gained impetus, and it just plunged into the middle of the Pit of Tophet. Stephen lay an inert mass. Lefferts lost his head and worked in a blind frenzy as he tugged and backed towards the gateway of the pit.

He never could tell how he did it but by some superhuman effort the titanic countryman dragged his helpless companion through the fearful fusillade, escaping disastrous hurt by a miracle. He dragged him the few feet to the opening of the corridor, dragged him around the angle under shelter of the rock, dragged him out of the jaws of a living grave at least to momentary safety.

Then, after just a second to catch breath, though he knew it was hopeless, Lefferts turned in blind devotion to essay a last fight for the girl's life. He stepped over Eltringham's body to the rock angle and gazed into the Pit of Tophet. His heart fairly stopped as he saw that Satan's Pulpit had disappeared, buried in a chaos of earth and rocks and trees, while a Niagara of ruin was pouring over it. Still

he would have given his life and entered the Pit to die with her if he could not save her; but as he put out his foot, a great pine tree, swept down from far up the mountain slope, was hurled into the gateway where he stood. Its upper branches flung him back, thrust him half stunned against the rock and held him there like the tentacles of a devil fish. He gasped, he struggled, he fought it and, at last, bruised and bleeding he forced his way out of its grip.

But now all too surely the end had come of everything on earth for the strange, wild girl who aspired to espousal with the Spirit of the Mountain. The tree in the narrow slit of rock was the seal of her tomb, and Lefferts with agony that it would be vain to describe heard the roar and the crash of the avalanche behind the barrier which he could not pass and beyond which, he knew, no puny human effort could avail. Sometimes, as he listened with tears streaming down his pale cheeks, his horror-keyed senses created to themselves the tone of the sweet, trivial voice in the gay, unmeaning little ditty. He would have sworn he heard it and he lifted his face to cry out in response. But he knew it was an illusion of his brain and his chin dropped back on his breast shaken with sobs and inarticulate lamentation.

Little time was given him for his grief or his horror-stricken imaginings. The stupendous emanation of dust that ascended from the Pit and began climbing up to meet the thunder clouds, spread out

into the corridor like a stifling smoke. Pebbles, too, came shooting into it, and the tree that blocked the opening, pushed further and further forward by the terrible weight behind, groaned and creaked and threatened to give way, loosing the earth flood to overwhelm them.

There was not a minute to lose. Yet for a moment, Lefferts did pause to grapple with the spirit of anger and revenge which — just for a moment — gained the mastery over him. In that moment the hellish temptation came to him to go away and abandon Stephen Eltringham to his fate. But the cowardice of it revolted him. The second alternative — that of sitting down and dying with him was truly hard to resist.

It was Stephen's helplessness that saved both. Had he been in the full vigor of consciousness and activity, Lefferts might have fallen upon him there and then, and the two might have found an eternal sleeping place in the Black Cross Clove as well as the girl. As for himself, Lefferts would just then have hailed death as the greatest bounty of God, but, as he overcame his passion, he sacrificed his own bitter longing in order to save the life that destiny had put in his keeping.

His mind once made up, with the instantaneous judgment of the trained mountaineer, Lefferts got out his rope, took a loop about Stephen's chest under the arms and coiled the line around his own waist. He sat down and, bracing himself against the rock,

pushed the insensible body off the shelf. Slowly paying out the rope, he lowered it to the icy bed of the gully.

He dropped himself, at the risk of breaking his limbs, and slipped twenty feet over the treacherous surface before he could stop himself. Then he crept back and, rolling Stephen over upon his rubber coat with his own peajacket as a pillow, he started to slide him down the frozen slope.

In the bottom of the gully, the air was comparatively clear of dust. He could breathe. But the roar went on behind and the tree in the rock slit quivered and groaned, and now earth and pebbles began falling over the top of it. The Pit of Tophet was filled up and flowing over, and still the mountain side with the forest clothing it, loosed from its grip on the core of rock, was rushing down into the valley.

Lefferts moved fast. He had to take some chances of injuring Stephen to get out of that narrow way where death was in such close pursuit and not to be avoided to right or left. On past the leaping rocks, he pushed his burden and round the corner under protection of the wall that so nearly shut in the extremity of the Clove. None too soon! For the crash behind told that the tree had given way and huge boulders, logs and tree branches, came skating out of the corridor and went bounding and leaping over the ice down the wider bed of the Clove.

They were far from safety yet. Lefferts realized that presently the earthfall would reach out to where they stood. Knowing the height of the mountain and the funnel shape of the hollow into which it was pouring itself, he believed that much of the Clove would soon be filled up.

But he could not slide Stephen any further over the ice. It was certain death to both. They could not escape the flight of stones and logs that was now tearing past them. He soaked his handkerchief in the wet that trickled over the ice and splashed it on the unconscious man's face, pouring some whisky, too, between his lips.

Stephen sighed, groaned and awoke from his swoon. He looked around. It all came over him in a rush.

"Can we save her?" he gasped.

"We can hardly save ourselves. We can't ef you don't wake up and hurry."

"I don't care," said Stephen. "I'm going to try."

"Try agin a mount'n?"

"I will."

Stephen turned. Lefferts grasped him.

"Take this," said he.

It was more whisky. Lefferts held his arm firmly.

"Climb up there," he said. "Ef we kin git on the shelf we kin follow the path out."

Stephen obeyed mechanically. He was too dazed for any real effort of will. But, again and again,

as they hurried desperately down the Clove, he turned and asked Lefferts if there was nothing they could do to save Ruth.

"She ben dead these ten minits," said Lefferts, "dead and buried. All the men in Winnesook couldn't dig her out in five years."

They kept along the shelf almost to the mouth of the Clove. Then came the moment of life or death. Could they, for the hundred feet or so which they must perforce travel over the ice, escape the hurtling missiles which they could hear but not see in the gloom of the approaching night. There was no choice. Lefferts feared to stay anywhere in the Clove. They must make a dash. They ran, staggering, slipping, tumbling, tearing their hands and splitting their garments as they fell. Stones and logs bumped and skated alongside them, but they were not struck. The stones, carroming on the rocks just above where they descended to the ice, were sliding off along the other side of the chasm to the open. They ran neck and neck with death for thirty seconds. Then they were safe.

Once outside the Clove and under the overhanging rock, Lefferts threw himself on the gritty snow panting and exhausted. Stephen sat down on a stone and rested his aching head on his hands.

It fell dark as they sat there — pitch dark. Only flashes of lightning every now and then brought the rocks and the trees and the dust pall into crimson visibility like the setting of a witches' sabbath.

Presently Lefferts heard Stephen mutter:

"Body and soul! Body and soul!"

It was ten o'clock when the men from the village came for them with torches and learned what had happened.

The start of the rescuers had been late. It was a long time before the men returned, discouraged, from their first hunt for Ruth Freer. Then they had to eat and wrangle, and it was long past dark when they started for the old trail over the South Mountain as Lefferts had directed.

After they had set out, all the women of the village stood in a great group opposite Ruth Freer's house, canvassing the situation in awed whispers. Suddenly, Silas Slocum burst in among them, in wild hysteria.

"The devil is loosed; the devil is loosed!" he howled, waving his hands.

The women shrieked.

"He's kem up out'n the Black Cross Clove. I seed him, I seed him with my own eyes as I kem down the road.

"I seed him acrost the glen — a giant, black devil with his head touchin' the sky.

"I seed him agin when the light'in' lit him up, an' I run here for my life in fear he'd see me too.

"Oh, God be merciful to us, for the Devil o' the mount'n's ben liberated from the rocks whar he's ben chained a thousand year!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AND

EPILOGUE

STEPHEN ELTRINGHAM ONCE MORE ENCOUNTERS
VIRGINIA SEAMAN

"How would you like to go to Europe this summer, Virginia?" asked Mrs. Seaman one morning after breakfast when the children had gone to school and Seaman to business.

"Go to Europe, mamma?"

"Yes. Your father and I have been talking it over. We think it would do you good. Grace Marshall and her mother are going, you know, and they'd be delighted to have you with them. Indeed it was Grace who first suggested it to me."

"I can't, mamma; I want to go to the mountains."

"Genia dear, that's just what we don't want — your father and I. We think you need change of scene and new occupation for your mind. Now Grace and her mother are going to stay until late in the fall. You will see new places and people and by the time you come back, you'll have forgotten any pain you feel now."

This was the first time Mrs. Seaman had ever directly spoken to Virginia of the wound she had suffered.

"I don't want to forget, mamma," Virginia interrupted.

"When you come back," Mrs. Seaman went on, as if she had not heard, "you will be your old self again. You will enjoy life as you used to, dear. As your father says, what you need is a new start."

"I expect to enjoy things again, mamma. I am not ill and I'm not going to die. I have been hurt, mamma"—here tears sprang into her eyes and while she spoke they trickled down her cheeks; but she spoke steadily without sobbing—"and I have suffered and I expect to suffer for a long time—always, I think, mamma, in a way. But, mamma, I'm more puzzled than anything. I want to go to the mountains to be quiet and to think it all out. I must go."

"But, Virginia, if you go to the mountains, you may see someone and the sight of him will bring it all up in your mind and make you suffer all over again."

Virginia shook her head drearily.

"No, mamma. I won't see him. Whatever his reason is, he will take care we won't meet. You must have noticed yourself."

"Well, but won't the very scenes, the country, his house and the like bring back distressing thoughts?"

"Maybe so, but it's what I need, mamma. I

tell you I'm looking forward to it. You won't cross me, I know, when I tell you I must go."

So the whole family went up to their house at the head of Winnesook Notch as usual in the first days of June and then the murder was out. Mr. Seaman heard the whole tragic story of Ruth Freer's death, — with emendations and additions — before he had been twenty-four hours in the place. It is needless to say that Stephen was not spared in the versions which reached him. The first impulse of himself and his wife was to run away with Virginia beyond reach of the scandalous tale. What prevented them was the lack of a decent excuse either for her or their friends.

Instead, they set to work to keep the story from her; this is an extreme of folly that even the most intelligent people sometimes fall into. They could be sure, of course, that they would not mention it themselves and Mrs. Seaman resolved to make a buffer of herself between Virginia and the villagers. She hoped that the story would be too dead for revival in a couple of weeks. It was already nearly a month old and had only been resurrected for their benefit. Later on, as everyone would assume that Virginia knew it, it would not come into anyone's head to tell her. This was plausible but it failed to make allowance for the chapter of accidents.

In the first place, there was the landslide. The great gray expanse of naked rock in the crease of the mountain on the Southern slope was visible



through a couple of miles of the Notch road. It was not only visible but the most conspicuous feature of the landscape. First of all, therefore, it had to be conceded that there had been a landslide.

Then, there were the children. The boys, of course, roaming around the country, picked up the story, and they repeated it at home — decked in a kind of boyish innocence, notwithstanding the plain speech of the country boys and men who told it to them. They almost defeated precautions and unloaded their budget of news upon Virginia. Their mother barely caught them in time and silenced them.

But the whole house was seething with the story. Everyone down to the servants knew it in one degree or another, even Kate having a puzzled, inchoate notion of it, and, of course, everyone talked about it and stopped talking about it when Virginia hove in sight. The atmosphere was full of mystery and the faces all about her were eloquent of unsaid things. She would have been a fool if she had not known that Stephen must be at the bottom of it, and she would have been even a greater fool if she had not guessed that there must be another woman tangled up in the situation. Under the ingenious management of her well-intentioned parents, she now entered upon a new phase of suffering.

She longed for Charley to consult, but Charley was growing to be a real lawyer and he was some weeks off. She went to the woods and the flowing

water for the comfort that she was too proud to seek from a mother who was keeping secrets from her, and so, one morning, when she was lonelier than ever, she wandered down the Notch as far as the Black Cross Clove. She went home, for the first time aroused out of her apathy, by the astounding discovery that the Clove had practically disappeared, that the Landslide had all but filled it up.

As she clambered up the wooden steps, which ran from the Seamans' garden level down into the heart of the ravine, and hurried across the lawn to the house, she was bubbling over with the news and she delivered it breathlessly to her mother at long range.

"Would you believe it, mamma," she exclaimed, still hurrying, "the Cross Clove is gone. The Landslide has filled it up. If you didn't know about it you couldn't believe there ever was such a place."

She was about to launch out upon a detailed description as she reached her mother's side, when Enos Fairweather, who was up looking after the usual spring repairs and improvements to the house, and who had been talking with Mrs. Seaman, took charge of the situation.

"Why, sartinly," said he. "Didn't you know about that? Why, that's whar Ruthy Freer was cot under the landslide an' buried alive, somewhar 'way inside in some far part o' the gully as I don't rightly know on. It was right out whar you was, as I understand it"—he didn't understand it at all, of

course —“ that One-Armed Lefferts an’ that young Eltringham chap from New York a’most lost their lives, too, a-tryin’ to fotch her out.”

“ Mr. Eltringham nearly lost his life!” exclaimed Virginia. Then sharply: “ Excuse me, mamma, I must hear this.”

Mrs. Seaman was, for once in her life, so taken by surprise that she was helpless. Fairweather was delighted to have a willing auditor.

“ Why, landsakes, didn’t you know about that?” said he. “ Why, yes, the pair o’ them went after her when she broke away crazy from her home an’ they just got up into the Clove in time to see her dancin’ an’ singin’ mad like up in the heart of it, when down comes the hull side o’ the mount’n on top of her head an’ she’s buried for all time. All the king’s horses an’ all the king’s men couldn’t git her out. It ’pears a stone fallin’ down knocked Eltringham on the head an’ Lefferts dragged him out for dead. He was able to walk home but he took to his bed next day an’ he was out of his head for two weeks an’ they’ve had two doctors an’ two nurses — them fancy ones you know that dresses all in blue an’ wears white caps an’ aprons — up from New York an’ I guess he had a close call.

“ The funny thing about it is: they say he never let out a word about Ruthy in all his ravin’s. He was talkin’ about some princess all the time. He called her the Princess Sunshine or summat like that an’ the nurses an’ the folk thought it must be some

actress woman he knowed down New York way. It's a kind of a fool name, you see. They say he was talkin' about her bein' lost in place o' Ruthy an' he fought to get up an' go an' look for her."

Virginia's face flamed and her heart nearly burst with joy.

"One moment, mamma," said she to her mother, who again tried to interfere. "Mr. Fairweather, can you tell me if Mr. Eltringham is recovering?"

"I don't know how he bes now. But he was gettin' on all right when he went away. The doctor that stayed up all the time an' the two nurses went with him an' one of them tuk down Ruthy Freer's baby with her, that Andy Garrett's wife had ben takin' care of."

Virginia went ashy white. This time it felt as if her heart had turned to lead in her breast. Her mother at last succeeded in breaking up the interview.

But Virginia now felt that she must know the whole story — know the worst. It was to her mother that she determined to go, first of all, for light. She went into Mrs. Seaman's room that afternoon, closed the door and sat down opposite to her.

"Mamma," said she, "what is the story about Mr. Eltringham that you are hiding from me?"

"Don't ask anything about it, Virginia dear. It is not good for you to hear it."

"No, mamma, that isn't so. It is far worse to know there is something. I keep thinking awful

things and I have no rest. Tell me the whole truth."

"I can't, Virginia. It is a story that I could not tell to you. You heard more to-day than was right. But, at least, there is this advantage; you are old enough and sensible enough to know that the rest is far better hidden."

"But I can't understand it, mamma. You see he loves me." She stopped, horror-stricken at herself for letting the words slip. But she regained her courage and went on: "I always knew he did, and you see I was right; for it was about me that he was thinking when he was out of his mind—about me and losing me. There can't be any doubt about the Princess of Sunshine, can there?"—she blushed adorably as she said this—"What can it all mean, mamma?"

"I am grieved to say it, Virginia, but I am afraid his love is no honor to a good girl."

"Oh, mamma!"

"He is a very bad man, and you must put him out of your head. He is unfit for you to think of even. You should summon all your pride and modesty to your aid and try to forget that you ever saw him."

"But I love him, mamma"—this almost in a whisper but very resolutely.

"Virginia," said her mother sternly, "I am ashamed to hear you say such a thing after what I have told you. Besides, you don't know what love is. You are hardly more than a child and you will get over your foolish dream in a little while. It would

be all over now if I had not yielded to you; if I had made you go to Europe with Mrs. Marshall as I should have done. Now you must prove to me that I did not make a mistake in letting you have your own way."

Virginia looked out of the window and sighed. Mrs. Seaman went on:

"It seems so odd too that you should form this fancy when Charley Mayhew fairly worships you. There's a lovely fellow and all you have to do is give him one kind look and be happy the rest of your life."

"Charley Mayhew!" exclaimed Virginia, startled for the moment out of her despond; "why, he's only a boy!"

"He's five years older than you and growing older."

"But I never thought of him — in that way, I mean."

Virginia did think of him then for exactly two minutes. He faded out of her mind at once into the regions of the impossible. She sat idly for quite a long while. The whole story of her love passed in review before her, ending with that day's talks with Fairweather and her mother.

"Mamma," she said at last, pleadingly, piteously, "won't you tell me what this story is about Mr. Eltringham?"

"I can't tell such a thing to a girl of your age. I am your mother and you must take my word for

it that it is of a nature to put him out of the question forever as a husband for you and the only thing to do is to forget him."

Virginia stood up and went out of the room without a word. Her mother expected her to show signs of resentment for a day or two and shrewdly calculated that the reestablishment of cordiality would bring with it a general change in Virginia's views and sentiments. In this as in many other details, she did not realize her daughter's divergence from the commonplace.

Virginia showed no resentment whatever. She was a little more depressed that evening than usual — that was all.

The next day, after luncheon, she did what she had never done before. Without consulting anyone, or asking leave, she went to the barn and ordered the buggy harnessed. She jumped into it by herself and drove off down the Notch to Winnesook.

She stopped at the Winnesook House, hitched the horse to a post and, as is the way in the country, walked straight into the kitchen. Annie Garrett, as Virginia figured would be the case, was alone. Her husband was off on some pretence of work; one of the children was at school the other was asleep. Mrs. Garrett had just finished washing the dinner things and had the room tidied up.

Virginia and she were quite friendly in a casual way. They had first met when Seaman bought his house on the mountain. Annie worked for the fam-

ily before she married Garrett; Virginia was really a little girl then; she had taken to Annie and Annie had taken to her. They had often met and chatted since, and the old kindness between them still held good.

Virginia manœuvred a little before sitting down so as to get the light at her back. After the inevitable questions about the children, she came right to the point.

"Mrs. Garrett," said she, "what is this story that's all around about Mr. Eltringham and Ruth Freer?"

"Lawsakes," said the woman, "is it only now you're askin' about that? Why, I thought all the world an' his wife knew it. It ain't much of a story. He seduced her; that's all there is into it."

"Seduced her!" exclaimed Virginia, deadly white.

The words conveyed no precise meaning to her mind but the horror of it was all the greater on that account.

"Seduced her!" she repeated dropping her voice to a gasping whisper.

"No," said Mrs. Garrett stridently, "I don't know as that's fair neither. It was her as seduced him an' that's the truth about it."

"She seduced him!" Virginia cried, her face full of wonder and shame.

"Yes, that's true. You may take my word for it. She told me herself, as we sat together in her house. She wanted him to take her to New York.

She laid for him on the road an' she followed him from pillar to post an' at last she went up to his house after him, though she knew it'd bring sure death on her. He never cared a continental for her. He put her off an' brushed her aside an' wouldn't have nothin' to do with her, until she took him at last kinder by surprise — an' then it waan't no sort o' use to her for she knowed from the minit that she was doomed to die."

"Doomed to die?"

"Yes, you know that there old story about the Eltringham curse. No one rightly knows just how it kem about, but you see it's true. She was only spared ontill her baby was born and then it overtook her quick."

"Until her baby was born?"

"Yes, hers an' his'n. Poor little thing! I'm sorry for it, losin' its mother before it's more'n a day or two old."

Accuracy was not Mrs. Garrett's strong point.

Virginia sat as if frozen. In her ignorance of the grosser things of life, the story was largely unintelligible to her. Only one thing she fully realized, its tragedy. She was horror-stricken at the dead girl taking the curse upon herself and at its fulfilment. She had a conception, too, of the catastrophe to Stephen. She began to grasp the motives of his conduct towards herself. She understood too little to appraise correctly or locate the blame, but, out of it all, the statement of Annie Garrett came upper-

most in the whirl of her thoughts that Stephen never cared for Ruth Freer.

“Did she love him so much, then?”

“She didn’t care one red cent for him. Leastways, she said so. She jest wanted him to take her out o’ here an’ make her an actress or a fine lady in New York. That’s her story. She was the craziest girl you ever heard tell on. Would you b’lieve it? She told me she was in love with the Indeen sperrit up yonder in the Cross Clove an’ he was the only man she ever had a hankerin’ after. The sperrit! Think of it, for a girl o’ flesh an’ blood!”

“And you say he never cared for her?”

“Never nohow. She said so herself. He came down an’ offered to make her his wife—that was after they tried to lynch him an’ he beat ’em off—but that was only because she was in trouble. She wouldn’t take his offer because he wouldn’t say he loved her an’ no one else. He wouldn’t say it because he couldn’t. It waan’t true. He only med his offer because he was square. He’s a man, I tell you, he is.”

“He couldn’t say he loved her?”

“No, ’course he couldn’t, fer he didn’t love her. Why, Ruthy herself told me she b’lieved he was gone on some lady up on the hill. She once said it was you, Virginia, an’—I tell you somethin’ funny—she hoped you’d marry him after she was dead.”

“But you say she followed him up and, and—seduced him.”

"It's true."

"She thought he loved me and she didn't care for him herself and she would steal him from me in that way! Oh, she must have been a bad girl!"

"Mebbe she was, but she's dead now."

Virginia felt in her soul that she deserved death. A new passion had suddenly started into life in the girl's heart. She had to fight herself to keep down the white hot anger that tried to burn its way through her lips in a lava of denunciation. Her eyes blazed and her cheeks burned. Her breast heaved convulsively.

But she held herself in as bravely as Stephen himself might have done; not out of charity for the dead, not from the stored forces of her Christian bringing up — there are moments when all who are worth counting return to primitive humanity — but because of her dignity. She would not lose control of herself before this other woman, her inferior.

Mrs. Garrett, however, was not of the same fine temper. Of a sudden, she began weeping bitterly and talking passionately.

"It's true, Virginia," she began, "it's you that should 'a' had him. You're the only one that's good enough for him. What was enny of us to look up to him? He's a man, he is. You should 'a' seen him fight — as brave as a lion; no, I won't say that; I'll say as brave as a man. An' so cool an' fine, as ef he was at a dance. Look what he gev me because I stood by him that day" — she hauled a

beautiful gold watch and chain from a cupboard — “but it isn’t for what it is that I vally it, but fer him that gev it.

“Now don’t go gettin’ no wrong ideas. There ain’t nothin’ bad. He never looked down at me except in the way o’ kindness, no more’n the king would at a beggar woman. But I’m glad I’ve knowed him fer he’s med me know what a real man is. Thank God I had a chanct just once to stand by him in trouble! An’ my hope an’ prayer is that you’ll marry him in the long run for you’d make the finest pair in all God’s universe — him so brave an’ handsome an’ you so gentle an’ sweet.”

Virginia thought and thought as the horse toiled up the mountain road, and someway she could not feel as crushed as she had for months before. Now she knew the truth of it all and assuredly it was better to know — better far than she had hoped. She might have lost Stephen forever, so far as marrying him was concerned; but he loved her, he had not been fooling her, he had been sincere in his wooing, he had been compelled by misfortune and the wickedness of another to give her up, but he was true to her in his heart. She would be true to him, too, she told herself, always and under all conditions. The outlook from this point of view seemed roseate in comparison with what it had been. She had an ideal left. She touched up the horse and reached home quite cheerful — to Mrs. Seaman’s great relief and still greater astonishment.

On Sunday morning after breakfast, Virginia sat down beside her father and curled his moustache and fixed his hair in her old playful way.

"Papa," she said, "you offered last year to let me go through Vassar if I wished, does the offer still hold good?"

"Certainly, Genia," he said.

So Virginia got out her books, found a highly accomplished high-school marm at the Notch Inn and spent all the rest of the summer polishing up her Latin grammar, her quadratics and other things on which the rust of a year of girlish idleness had accumulated. Virginia had found an interest in life. She was again able to be in earnest. It is not great fortunes alone that are made as the result of heartache; the modern woman has found a substitute for the nunnery in learning. Hamlet up-to-date would probably exclaim to a Twentieth Century Ophelia: "Get thee to Girton!"

And all this summer, while Virginia Seaman regained cheerfulness through faith and work, the wind and the rain and the sun completed the transformation of the Black Cross Clove. The wind and the rain smoothed and rounded the contours of the great demi-pyramid of earth which almost concealed the place where it had been. Then the rain and the sun started life anew in a million crannies of the fallen earth. The air and the insects carried germs of wild plants to it; buried trees pushed forth shoots between the stones and by the end of July the wide slope was

clothed in green and from the road on the other side of Winnesook Notch it was not easily distinguished from the rest of the forest. Only those who knew the mountains well missed, just below the vast grey tract of naked rock that scarred the upper slope, that deep, dark, gloomy furrow, which had, time out of mind, been the abode of horror, real and imaginary.

The demon was liberated from the abysses of the earth, and simple nature, always ready to smile in beauty and fruition, had possession of the Winnesook glen from one mountain side to the other and from summit to plain.

“Custom demands — and who denies her sway?— an epilogue.” At least he who has lived with the people of the Black Cross Clove through so many troubled pages must fain hope that the reader who is to follow the track of his pen will be enough interested in these children of his fancy to long for some hint of their subsequent fortunes.

But with the sealing up of the Clove itself, out of which all this story has emanated, the source of inspiration is cut off. Only the last fumes of the delicious ether of creative impulse linger in the brain cells and awaken vague and scattered glimpses of the men and women, a page ago so real in the mind's eye, so full of a life that is hopeless to convey in words.

One fleeting picture shows Stephen Eltringham again in the studio on West Tenth street, with the sunshine again streaming upon armor and quaint glass and curious pottery and fabrics woven in the poetry of color. A young woman who looks like a better class nurse-maid waits near the door, and by Stephen's knee, with one tiny hand upon it, stands a little Ruth of elfin beauty, whose wise talk stirs him to peals of laughter though the rims of his eyelids grow suspiciously red, until he stoops and lets her smooth his moustache before she kisses him and dances out of sight.

The work on his easel is in oils, and it must be to this period of his career that those pictures are to be referred which were the foundation of his growing fame: That "Soul of the Mountain," which is a portrait of Ruth Freer until you look intently at it, when, by some trick of workmanship, which the too artistic denounce as not true art, it seems transformed into the countenance of an Indian brave, serene, severe, mystical; and then the strange picture, "Guilt," which excited so much discussion when he exhibited it at the Paris Salon — that picture of a young man, beautiful and blind, with a fatuous, smiling face and his two hands extended in front of him, groping.

There are other visions less clear than this. One seems to belong to a time when war's alarm pealed through the land and the gallant youth — in whom modern perversion has not been able to stifle the

spirit inherited from their fathers — rallied in thousands to fight under their country's flag beyond the seas.

On the slope of a hill where the ochre of the thirsty earth but deepens the richness of the tropical green, where, nearby, frowning ships are dotted over a sea of burnished steel and where a sky of azure and gold hangs over all, a young man with wavy hair and a bounding step and eyes that seem to look at the sun, a young man who is not a soldier by trade but who, having played at the game in the piping times of peace, has thought it the part of a man to draw his sword in earnest when the call is sounded, is separated from his comrades in the tumult of advance. A dark Iberian face starts out amid the sheltering leafage and a rifle is aimed point blank at the advancing youth. He gives himself up for lost when a wild cry rings out from the thicket and a tall, active figure — not a soldier this time but an artist, following the army for excitement with the excuse of a magazine commission — springs forward and seizes the weapon just at the instant of its discharge. The timely rescuer falls wounded — most likely not very seriously — and the Spaniard is preparing to finish him, when the wavy haired youth, with flashing eye and quivering nostril, charges upon him and cuts him down, then, turning to his prostrate savior, exclaims, "Stephen!"

It is only a little later when, in a great camp by a cooler sea, where the winds have a northern stimula-

tion, the youth with the wavy hair lies stricken, not with sword or bullet, but with the deadly fever of the torrid bivouacs. He is one of thousands trembling between hope and death. As he lies, listlessly gazing through the tent flaps at the sea, a tall, straight figure tapering from shoulders to feet comes in with step not as firm as might be. The left arm is in a sling and the face is still pale. In spite of a settled sadness of expression, the visitor smiles with that old smile that is so taking and the fever victim smiles back as he thrusts a thin, wan hand from under his covers.

And while they talk a girl comes into the tent and as Stephen rises in some embarrassment she advances swiftly to him and taking his hand in both of hers she says fervently:

“Oh, Mr. Eltringham, you saved Charley for us!”

And in a moment all are in sympathy and the two who are on sure ground address themselves to inspiring the wavering one with conviction of life and health.

One last scene embodies itself more clearly. It is under the overhanging rocks at the entrance of the onetime Black Cross Clove. The glory of July is in the sun and the air. The trees are in richest leaf and the open spaces are gay with wild flowers. The creek below, hidden by the woods, is still heard cooing and gurgling words of love in its own strange, beautiful language.

Deep in the face of the rock there has been cut an arched recess with sentinel columns and its walls are sculptured in low relief with figures copied from the picture writing of the Indians. In a land where art was very old and the imagination of mankind had acquired intimacy with nature, it would be taken for a shrine of the woodland deities. In the centre of the recess, there is a bronze tablet set into the rock. On it are modeled in moderate relief the profiles of Ruth Freer and of an ideal Winnesook. Below the heads is this:

"We are such stuff as dreams are made of."

The wonders of the Winnesook Notch have been discovered and explorers grow numerous. The landslide and the death of Ruth Freer, already assuming a legendary aspect, have made the site of the Black Cross Clove a show spot for tourists and the old wood road on the South Mountain is again an open and freely travelled way. Thus it happens that two men are able to drag over it — though not without much hard work — a go-cart in which a four year old girl of full four year old avoirdupois is the passenger.

A child with dark brown eyes — wild fawn — and straight black hair, olive skin and straight noble features; a somewhat serious child full of minute observations and quaint deductions. Her father lifts her to the ground as they reach the shade of the rocks and, taking her by the hand, leads her for-

ward to the shrine. Their one-armed companion lingers a step or two behind and, taking off his soft felt shapeless hat, mops his forehead with his handkerchief. He is stouter than of old and obviously out of training.

Holding the child's hand, Stephen stands bare-headed before the shrine; then he walks to the old Clove entrance and gazes at the slope already covered with a young forest of hardy saplings. Long he looks, not at the mound, but through it at the pictures of death and horror that it so smilingly conceals. The child gazes into his face.

"Ruth," he says, "I want you to look about you and absorb the picture of this place. Keep it in your memory. I hope you will often see it. I wish you to know it well. Some day, I will tell you about it. Not now; but when you are older and can understand."

The child makes no answer but drinks in the scene with wondering eyes. Then she runs to pick wild flowers while the two men stand together and talk long and earnestly in low voices.

As they stand together, lapsing at last into silence, their attention is aroused by a crackling of twigs. They look around and a girl — a Vassar graduate, I trow — steps out of the copse, happening upon the little cove where alone the full sunlight strikes down to the earth in that place. As it streams over her, lighting up her nut brown hair, it dazzles her a moment. Then she recovers herself and sees the

men standing in the shadow. Her lithe, graceful figure sways in a momentary hesitation, but she recognizes the faces and, with faintly deepening color and a mist of light veiling her eyes, as it seems, and shimmering intoxicatingly before them, she steps forward holding out her hand.

It is plainly not a premeditated meeting, but neither does it seem to be an astounding accident to the principal couple. It would be safe to guess that these two had not been without encounters or at least some sort of correspondence in the recent past.

After the first greetings, Virginia Seaman turns to the one-armed giant with a pretty smile and blush.

"I suppose I may still congratulate you on your marriage with Annie, Mr. Lefferts, though I am some months behind time," she says, "I hope you are very happy."

"Thank you, Miss Virginia," Lefferts answers. "I think we are happy. I know as I am. My wife is a very fine woman an' I always had a high respect for her, even before poor Andy's death."

"She is good and true," replies Virginia, "and I am glad she is well settled."

Just here the small girl comes marching up, her pretty dress sticking out around her primly and her grave, wide open eyes taking in the newcomer as she grips her father's fingers.

Virginia looks at the child and then at Stephen with a smile of invitation.

"This is little Ruth," he says simply, moving her forward a step and adding with a drop in his voice, "She's a dear little thing."

"Come to me, sweetheart," cooes Virginia, sitting down on a stone.

The child advances gravely between her knees, studying her face, then puts out her little hands and, catching hold of one of Virginia's peachy cheeks with each bunch of tiny fingers, pulls her face down to her own and kisses her on the mouth.

"There's a Fwench kiss for you," she lisps; "I love you."

Virginia catches her in her arms and smothers her in hugs. There are tears in Virginia's eyes. But who can escape tears when caressed by a child?

The little one dances off to Lefferts presently and he discreetly lets her drag him into the wood.

"I am glad Mr. Lefferts married Annie Garrett," says Virginia. "I think it is a good thing for both of them."

"She has got one of the best men living and he has a true hearted woman," Stephen replies. "They will get along famously. Lefferts, you know, is in a fair way to break the Winnesook tradition by growing rich. He is a quarry owner now, and, as he is working intelligently and developing the business — creating a market and supplying it — he is making money."

"I think I can guess whom he has to thank for that."

"Oh, I did nothing worth speaking of; lent him a little cash to start; that's all. The idea was his own and he's done all the work. If he succeeds, he deserves all the credit. How is Charley? I haven't seen him all this spring."

"He is well and succeeding beautifully at the law. Papa"—accent on the second syllable—"says he has a great many—what do you call them? clients, you know; and he says he's very careful and clever and everyone has great confidence in him. But of course you know the real news?"

"Nothing special."

"About the engagement—his engagement—he's to be married in the fall, you know."

For some reason blushes mantle again in Virginia's cheek and she stammers over the announcement.

"Ah," Stephen exclaims, and he turns white and cold.

"Didn't you know about it?"

Stephen shakes his head.

"Don't you care about it? You take it funnily."

"Why, I'm—I'm almost afraid to ask any questions"—this as if to himself while Virginia looks wonderingly at him. Then he recovers himself: "Oh, I beg your pardon, I don't know what I'm saying. Won't you tell me about it? I wonder Charley never wrote me."—He braces himself as for a shock—"Won't you tell me who the lady is?"

"The lady? Didn't I tell you? Why, the lady is Grace Marshall, my cousin. You've met her."

"Oh," says Stephen, more unnerved in his relief than he would have been by the blow that he expected. "Oh! Miss Marshall! Why, I never thought of her. Really, I never thought of her. Yes, yes, I've met her — met her a number of times. A charming girl. So it's she that Charley's going to marry!"

"Yes, certainly, why shouldn't he?"

"No reason at all. I'm delighted"—for more reasons than one, he might have said—"I must write to Charley and congratulate him."

"I'm to be bridesmaid."

"Miss Marshall is very fortunate."

There is a pause. Virginia is looking at the shrine in the rock. Stephen studies her profile, so delicate, so sensitive without being weak. He draws the hairs of his moustache between the second finger and thumb of his left hand. A look like the memory of an old, old pain comes into his face in spite of the smile, that is so engaging, lingering upon his lips.

Virginia is just turning to speak when he forestalls her:

"You are out of Vassar now, are you not? What are your plans?"

"I don't know. I really have none. That is the sad part of it. I only went to Vassar to meet an emergency. Don't misunderstand me; I am glad I went; it gave me something to live for at a time when life looked very empty." She reddens with consciousness of the underlying meaning of her words, but she goes on bravely and firmly, looking Stephen

in the eyes: "The work, the conditions of life, the routine, the companionship were just what I wanted. But now they're over, I am rather at a loss. I have no desire for a career, as they call it. In a way, life looks empty again, though not as bad as it once did. Do you remember once telling me how sure sorrow was to come into my life?"

"Good God, yes! Shall I ever forget it?"

"Do you remember telling me also that it would all come right in the end? Well, I hope you were as right in one thing as in the other."

"Oh, yes. I'm sure it's true. Everything will come right in the end — in this world or the next. But I'm afraid there are those who must wait for the other world. They are those who have thrown away their lives."

"I don't see how a man can say that. A man has so many interests in this life — his work, friends, public duties, I don't know all the things. And if he fails to win in one direction, all the others are open to him."

"Miss Seaman, everyone of us, man and woman, has one aim that he cherishes above all others. With some it is ambition — to win power and fame — with others it is wealth, or learning. There are some, too, with whom it is love. The one mastering passion pales and dwarfs all other desires and purposes. They may be pursued and attained independently of it; if it is won too, they are flowers and ornaments for the feast of life; but if we are disappointed in

the one great aim, whatever it is, our lesser victories are faded tinsel or the dregs of wine."

"It makes me very sad to hear you talk that way. It seems as if you were speaking about yourself."

"I am. I have committed the unpardonable sin. I have thrown away my life. I have everything but the one thing that is nearest my heart, that is in the marrow of my bones, and everything that I have is a mockery to me."

"Do you not, perhaps?"—Virginia's voice is but a whisper—"Do you not, perhaps, exaggerate the effect of sin upon yourself?"

"As for that, I'm afraid I am what you might call impiously defiant. It is largely through our sins and failings, our struggles with them and our victories over them that we become real men and women, and not mere abstractions."

"Then, Mr. Eltringham, why should you be so despondent about your shortcomings? Why should you call anything that you have done unpardonable?"

"Because I am unable to pardon myself so I cannot ask for pardon and God does not send out angels with messages of peace to us nowadays."

Virginia, dispirited, muses, looking at the ground a minute. So does Stephen, gloomily pulling at his moustache, and shifting the pebbles with his foot. Then she looks up and speaks, plainly to end the tension:

"This is a beautiful monument you have made to

— to her. I really came here to see it. I notice you have put the Indian's head with hers. It is strange; the real and the unreal linked together."

"He was real in her mind and heart. What other reality is there? He may, in an infinite sense, be as real as she. What do any of us know about reality?"

"At any rate, she gained what you spoke of just now as the greatest good. She reached the great aim of her life."

"Yes, she is united with him. Fate worked in her case with strange precision."

"I hear your house is gone."

"Yes, we put a few barrels of petroleum in it and set it on fire. What was left, I had blown up with dynamite — especially that doorstep with the curse on it. I had it blown to powder. I had the hole left by the blasting filled, and the plough run over the entire lot until you couldn't tell where the house stood. I have given the land to some nuns and they are going to build a big orphan asylum on it."

"I am sorry it's gone."

"So am I in a way, but it had to go. You see, she's a Freer" — nod towards the wood where little Ruth's voice is heard prattling to Lefferts. — "She's of the direct Freer line, and the curse would be on her, and I couldn't take any risk."

"You are not going to keep her away from Winnesook altogether?"

"No, I couldn't bring myself to do that. Her

mother lies here and she must come sometimes. Any chance of ill that's left, she must take. But I've done my best to banish the old curse, whatever it was, from the earth."

There are tears again trembling in Virginia's eyes, but they don't brim over. She seems to be struggling with something in herself, something that makes her cheeks paler, that makes her pant a little with anxious, parted lips.

"She's a dear little thing," Stephen says gently.

"Perhaps she's the angel of grace sent to you."

"Maybe so. She is certainly a reason for living on. I must take care of her. She has no one else — poor motherless little creature!"

Virginia turns to him and rests her hand on his coat sleeve. She looks into his eyes with exquisite pleading in her face.

"Stephen," she says, "let me be a mother to her."

THE END

